

I trust in your smile. I won't care whether you are soulless or not.

Satoshi Hase



V12

VISIT...

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Phase9「Answer for Survive」

He didn't feel regret. He knew his own limits, and he knew the place was, relatively speaking, calm.

The life he had lived up to that point was about to end, but there he sat, just killing time. As he listened in the darkness to the sounds of his family moving around, feelings of helplessness welled up within him. He was even struck by the sudden impulse to run to them for help. But instead he sat there, staring at the dark ceiling.

He knew his worries were irrational. But if everyone in the world had been able to throw away their own doubts and stretch out their hands to others, trusting in them, the world would not have turned out the way it had.

If humanity was divided between those who looked at the sunset and saw the beauty of the fading light, and those who saw it and feared the coming night, he would fall in the latter group. It was thanks to his own pessimism that he had ended up where he had. But he was sure half the world felt the same as he did.

No matter how much everything else had changed, Arato was still a high school student. So every day, he went to school. Kengo was always there in the classroom, too. After becoming Methode's owner, Ryo Kaidai didn't come to school as often, but sometimes he was there, too. Their paths had divided, but they still studied and did club activities. To Arato, the fact that there was still one thing they all had in common made things better, somehow.

"Morning, Endo," said one of the nearby girls, greeting him when he walked into the classroom. Ever since things had gotten weird between him and Ryo, he and Kengo had grown more popular among their classmates. Ryo had a large presence, and Arato doubted the fickle nature of personal relationships in high school would change no matter how many decades went by.

That much change he could get used to, though, and he was all ready to continue living out a normal high school life. But, that day, Arato saw a face he'd never expected to see waiting for him in his first-hour homeroom class: it

was a brown-skinned girl with platinum blonde hair, whose party he had attended not too long ago. Today she was dressed in a normal high school uniform, completely unlike the night of the party.

When she addressed the class, she puffed out her chest and looked down at them with her normal queenly air. “I’m Erika Burroughs,” she introduced herself.

A shock ran through the classroom as everyone realized they were in the presence of a celebrity, one whom everyone had heard about on TV.

When things get too normal, people start to hunger for something exciting to break through the tedium, so it wasn’t long before she was the talk of the whole school. Videos of Erika started showing up on the local net, which was run by the students, in huge amounts. During breaks, not only students from their class, but also students from completely different classes, would show up and flock to her seat. Students even lined up in the hallway just to get a look at her.

“Some of those vids are going to start leaking out into the public internet soon,” Kengo said. With how crazy things were getting at school, it was only natural that Kengo would take notice as well.

“I had no idea she was this famous,” Arato said.

“Watch the news, will you?” Kengo grumped. “Last year, they were talking about her constantly. I mean, this is the very first person to be brought out of cryo-sleep that we’re talking about. She’d been sleeping since the start of the 21st century.”

“Well yeah, but she was still just a normal person who got frozen,” Arato protested. “Beyond that, what else is there to her?” Ever since Erika had started coming to school, the students had all been acting as though every day was a festival.

Kengo stayed in his seat, but shifted his gaze to the knot of students around Erika. “I guess there’s an element of fantasy to it,” he mused. “A person from the previous century is almost like a person from a completely different world. Plus, she’s from the Burroughs family. They’re crazy rich, with all kinds of companies in their name.”

“Well yeah,” Arato said. “But Ryo’s family is crazy rich too, right?”

Kengo dropped his voice lower. “Yeah, but they say she’s got even more money than the Kaidais,” he murmured. “Plus, everyone else in the Burroughs family... well, they didn’t make it through the Hazard. All that’s left of the Burroughs is their lone heir and the massive amounts of wealth she inherited.”

Arato made a sympathetic noise when he realized what Kengo meant by ‘didn’t make it.’ So, Erika was an orphan? Images of the Burroughs mansion, where the party had been held, floated up in his mind. The gates and furnishings of the place were from a different age; everything preserved in the state it had been in when Erika was frozen in the early 21st century.

“How can everyone smile like that around her, then?” Arato asked. “Her life is a tragedy.”

“The news put a pretty good spin on it,” Kengo said, shooting another glance at the crowd. “Turned her into a modern Sleeping Beauty.”

Arato followed his eyes and unexpectedly found himself meeting the gaze of Erika herself.

“Well, what a pleasant surprise,” she said, standing elegantly and walking over to his desk. “It appears we are in the same class.” Wrapped in a school uniform, her already sickly-thin body looked even more delicate.

Suddenly, all eyes in the class were on Arato, who was just an ordinary high school student, and the pressure of all those gazes made him freeze up. Fear quickly swallowed any of the normal happiness or embarrassment that he might have felt from being the center of attention.

Meanwhile, Erika bathed in the attention as she greeted Arato politely and then passed him by.

It was as if a giant monster had brushed by him. Not Erika herself, of course, but the massive pressure of the students’ gazes that followed her. For a moment he pictured how it would be if Lacia and the other hIEs’ fight went public, and Arato’s breath caught in his throat.

If his classmates ever found out about what was happening with Lacia and her ‘sisters’, they would treat Arato even worse than they were treating Ryo, he

was sure. The thought of all those staring eyes and raw emotions being pointed at him made him shiver. But Arato also remembered watching Lacia act as a model; he knew that, as horrible as the staring eyes of a crowd could be sometimes, they were also a window into the reality of the giant system known as human society.

Without thinking it through, Arato called out to Erika as she went to leave the class. “Where’s your hIE at?” he asked. He was sure that Erika had shown up at the school as part of her battle plan, so Mariage should have been there with her.

Erika looked back at him. “My hIE is in the waiting room,” she said. “If I had her accompany me to class, how would I ever get any studying done?”

The classroom should have been a safe place for Arato, but at that moment he was feeling the same goosebumps he had on the night of the party. He looked around for Ryo, who should have been nearby, but Ryo was nowhere to be found.

Erika tilted her head in consternation. Knowing her real background just made her seem like even more of a stranger in that time and place. “It’s unfortunate Ryo Kaidai doesn’t appear to be here,” she remarked. “I was hoping to speak to him a little more.”

After Erika showed up, the whole school went through an antique phase. Aside from their modern terminal pads, students wanted their bags and accessories to match the 21st-century ones Erika brought to school. To Arato, it seemed like Erika was actually enjoying her high school life; she showed up every single morning and attended all of her classes. She even ate lunch together with her classmates.

Arato pushed his desk over next to Kengo’s and munched on a sandwich he had bought from the school store. Kengo’s family ran a restaurant, so he had a lunch from home every day.

“Actually I make my own lunch every day,” Kengo said, seemingly out of nowhere and to nobody in particular.

“Huh?” Arato had no idea what Kengo was reacting to, so he looked at the hamburger and potato salad in his friend’s lunch. Even the apples, which had

been cut to look like little rabbits, did seem to fit Kengo's personality.

"I might inherit the restaurant someday," Kengo explained. "Plus, I make mine and Olga's together, so it saves some time. Why don't you have that hIE of yours make your lunches?"

"I don't really want everyone knowing about her," Arato said. "And I don't want to have to make stuff up when someone asks who made the lunch." Also, things had been awkward between Arato and Lacia ever since he'd confessed his love for her.

"You're creeping me out, man," Kengo said. "Why the hell are you putting that much thought into this?"

Arato realized his face was bright red. "Of course I'm taking this seriously," he said defensively. "I'm terrified."

"What? You?" Kengo asked, honestly shocked. "I always thought optimism was one of your strong points."

Arato wanted to clutch at his head in despair. Thinking about Lacia made his rational mind go out the window. When he thought about spending the future with her, especially, fear sent shivers up his spine.

"You really have changed ever since you met that hIE," Kengo mused.

"You mean I've gotten more mature? I'll agree, if that's what you meant," Arato said. As freaked out as they made him, thoughts of Lacia also made his lips curl up in a natural, dreamy smile. Kengo let out a sigh, as if he couldn't stand being with Arato when he was like this.

One of the girls from their class walked over to their joined desks. Behind her, Arato could see Erika, who had returned to her seat, waving her hand. Apparently, the girl who had walked over was excited to have been given an order by the delicate young queen.

"Um, Erika wants everyone to gather at her desk," she said. She wasn't the only one; several other of Erika's worshipers were happily running her message around the class.

"May I ask for your company?" Erika inquired, beckoning with a smile. "I am

really enjoying going to school,” she said, once she had their attention. “Would you be surprised if I told you I always wanted to try attending school?”

Several female students had slid their desks over to Erika’s, creating a large island. As expected of the owner of her own company, Erika’s lunch was extravagant. She had even brought along fruits and paper plates to share with everyone.

Whenever Erika opened her mouth, the girls around her automatically shut their own.

“Even before I went to sleep, I was always in the hospital, so I was never able to attend school,” she said. “There is nothing quite as interesting as something you believed you would never have, only to get your hands on it at last.”

As if to protect their Sleeping Beauty from boredom, the seven girls who had gathered their desks around hers began chatting. “I was just saying this, but there’s been a bunch of vids of Mikoto on the net recently,” one of the girls said. “Ever since she got busted during that terrorist attack, there have been all these videos of her doing silly things, or singing songs. But they weren’t there before the attack, right?” The ponytailed speaker speared a slice of melon and passed the conversation on to the next girl.

Kengo’s chopsticks stopped moving. He had been there, during that terrorist attack. He had been one of the Antibody Network terrorists *committing* the attack.

The girl with the ponytail suddenly looked in their direction. Leaving her fork, she walked over to their desks. “Do you know anything about the videos, Endo? Your dad was involved with that stuff, right? Is he making them?” she asked, too focused on talking to Arato to notice Kengo’s troubled expression.

Before Arato could answer that he didn’t know anything about it, a girl with a short bob-cut continued the discussion. “So someone’s posting her videos after she got broken? Isn’t that kind of nasty?” she asked.

“It totally is,” the ponytail girl agreed. “But the vids had tons of views. One of them already had a million last time I looked. Who the heck is watching them?”

“I mean, you were, right?”

Without waiting for Arato's answer the ponytail girl was pulled back into the conversation and returned to her seat. "But isn't it weird how she got famous like that?" the first girl asked. "I didn't even know who Mikoto was until I saw the video about her getting destroyed."

Erika, setting aside her status as a CEO to be a normal high school girl for the moment, joined in the conversation with obvious interest. "With the popularity of those shocking videos, Mikoto has gotten a brand new character," she said. "It's almost as though the Mikoto everyone has come to know as the videos spread is a completely different being. We humans assign identity to things based on how they appear to us."

Arato, who hadn't spoken a word despite being invited into the circle of the conversation, met her gaze.

Erika tapped at her cup with one finger. It had Hello Kitty on it, and was probably from the 21st century like the rest of her stuff. "For example, imagine you're a child who dearly wants one of these Hello Kitty cups," she said. "To someone who wants one of these, it is not merely a cup. It has a special meaning to those who want it, simply because of the character printed on the side. I think the concept that a simple cup like this could become beloved because of its appearance is quite beautiful, personally."

The white kitten in her ribbon had worn myriad costumes over the hundred-plus years since her creation, and Arato had to agree that her cute presence indeed made Erika's cup seem like something special.

Erika narrowed her eyes in amusement, as if to provoke Arato. As she looked at him, he got the feeling that she was comparing his relationship with Lacia to that of the child who wanted a Hello Kitty cup.

"I don't really care where affection comes from," Arato growled. "My feelings are still important to me."

"Oh, of course your affection is important," Erika replied. "But it's also easily misdirected. Through the years, we've stood mice, ducks, hedgehogs, beagles and all sorts of other animals up on two legs to create characters that everyone would love. Just how many beloved 'almost human' icons do you think there have been over the years?"

Erika rested her chin on her hands, looking dissatisfied with the poor reactions she was getting.

“I won’t argue that love doesn’t have its place, but you should also realize that it’s a force which can be measured like any other,” she said. “For example, if we go back to what you were just talking about, those videos have set Mikoto up to become a tragic character that people can love. Objects, characters, and machines can easily bear the burden of the identities we project onto them. But a human would crumble, walking the lonely road of living up to others’ interpretations of them.”

She seemed to be looking for a response, so Arato decided to raise his voice for the others. “Are there many people who do that?” he asked.

Erika smiled. “I myself became ‘Sleeping Beauty’ without realizing it,” she replied simply, and then took up her Hello Kitty cup in one hand to sip at her warm milk.

Lacia was continuing her work as an hIE model. Even after everything that had happened, she aggressively attended studios and location shoots that could have been dangerous. Arato got the feeling that she prioritized her modeling work over the fight in which they were caught up.

Lacia was doing a studio shoot that day, which was something Arato was finally getting used to. It was actually a competition with human models in the mix, so the number of staff on location was larger than normal. Lacia’s popularity had grown steadily, and had spread enough by this time that she was being given jobs from major advertising media clients.

“Why do you look so gloomy?” a voice asked Arato. “I’d say it went really well.”

Arato had been going to say his greetings, but someone had beat him to the punch. She was a tall, long-haired woman, with an air of carefully cultivated beauty. Her name was Oriza Ayabe, and she had almost been crushed by a chandelier previously when Methode attacked during Lacia’s big photo shoot.

In the studio, Lacia was acting out a normal lifestyle with a stylish male model, though the place was strangely missing any of the sounds that Arato would associate with normal life. She was doing a joint shoot with a human male

model, today; apparently she was playing the guy's female friend. Of course, everything from the furniture to their accessories was a product being advertised. The male model was tall and muscular, more handsome than Arato by far. But even he looked inferior next to Lacia.

"Though I'm surprised," Oriza continued, watching the studio shoot from afar with her arms crossed. "I figured you'd be more jealous."

To Arato, the expressions Lacia was aiming at her model partner were more overdone than the ones she showed him. "She always looks more natural with me," he said.

"Oh, gross. I do *not* want to hear about it," Oriza said, her shoulders shuddering in disgust. Especially among women, the concept of a man being in a romantic relationship with an hIE was not seen in a positive light.

One of the camera assistants got a text and hurriedly raised his voice. "Yuri's here!" he shouted, and the room was suddenly full of tension.

An androgynous girl, her dark green hair cut in a short bob, entered the dim light of the studio. This was Fabion MG's top hIE model, Yuri, and loud voices were raised as everyone in the studio greeted her. Normally, there should have been no reason for a machine like Yuri to get such deferential treatment. But, especially on that day, there was no denying the explosive charisma that Yuri gave off. Even the director of the shoot politely stood from his chair to greet the almost supernaturally charming Yuri.

"Oh, give me a *break*," Oriza grumped, eyebrows knitting in revulsion at the display.

Arato didn't know how to react. Yuri certainly was charming, but she was also being used as a tool. He couldn't help recalling what Erika had said that day at lunch.

"So Yuri's a Hello Kitty cup too, huh?" he mused. When you got right down to it, an hIE model's job was to fill a role with their own appearance. Since the people who saw Yuri thought of her as being a top idol, she was treated like one. Lacia was doing the same thing.

Arato suddenly felt like asking something of the girl going green with envy

next to him. “If you saw shops raising the prices of the clothing you wear specifically because you wear it, would that make you happy?” he asked.

“If that *didn’t* happen, I’d be a failure as a model,” Oriza replied. “And that goes double for walking mannequins like your Lacia.”

“I don’t follow,” Arato said.

“If folks don’t look at you and say, ‘man, I wish I could be like her,’ then you’re worthless as a model,” she explained. “Though, honestly, it’s getting annoying with them taking it all the way into lifestyle stuff with this ‘boy meets girl’ concept.”

Apparently, Oriza knew the concept behind Lacia’s ads, and her cloudy face suddenly brightened as she seemed to remember something. “Hey Arato,” she said. “Introduce me to that boy, Ryo. The one who saved me during the attack.”

“I don’t know if having *me* set you up with him is a good idea,” Arato said. “But you should just go talk to him. I’m pretty sure he’ll be happy no matter what you say.”

“Well it’s not like I can romance an hIE, right?” Oriza said, eyes shining at the thought of dating Ryo.

“He’s said pretty much the same thing,” Arato said. “Maybe you two would be good together. I can’t set you up with him, but I can at least give you his number.”

Arato stood, watching Lacia and the male model acting out their lifestyle on stage from far enough away to not bother the staff. “Sorry, but it kinda pisses me off to see them play-acting at being lovers, now that I know what real romance is,” Arato growled. Even though he knew it was an act, he couldn’t help seeing the fake romance as a reflection of the real thing.

But Arato knew that, apart from himself, the other people who saw this video would see a dreamlike reality in which humans and hIEs had drawn closer together. To the fans watching the video, the clothing Lacia wore as an hIE model was more than just an outfit; her wearing the clothes made people want to buy them, even at high prices. There was a gap between the value the clothes were perceived to have and their actual existence that slipped through

the holes in the viewers' rationality, which created a reason for them to buy the clothes. The company was using analog hacking to raise the value of objects by manipulating the viewers' perceptions of those objects. To return to Erika's analogy: if a company wanted to sell a Hello Kitty cup, they only had to convince children that it was more than just a cup.

"Fabion does some pretty shady stuff," Arato muttered, without thinking.

Oriza looked at him like he was a moron. "You mean using analog hacking?" she asked. "Even without hIEs, everyone's been doing that since forever ago. Why do you think businesses put characters on products in the first place?"

"I guess that's what Erika meant when she was saying there had been stuff like the cup going on throughout history," Arato mused. "At the party, too, she was talking about fictional characters interacting with the human world, or whatever. I guess it does make sense."

Like the broken Mikoto, Lacia was gaining popularity among viewers both young and old. In order not to disrupt the image of the characters they created for their models, Fabion MG treated them with extreme care. Even during the shoot that Arato was watching, if the male model got too close to Lacia, the director would instruct him to open some space. It was just like how rights holders, back when the Hello Kitty cup was made, would always fight to protect their copyrights to ensure that nothing would sully the image of their character.

Fabion was looking to create a new icon—a new Hello Kitty, as it were. They wanted Lacia to be a character, so that when they slapped her on a cup, or goods, or clothing, anyone who saw them would see the 'boy meets girl' hIE and human romance dream which the company wanted to project.

"I don't really want her to turn into a character," Arato said. "I just want her to stay the same old Lacia. I know she's always saying she's just a machine that takes on any personality she needs to, but I still think there's a real her." Arato couldn't look away. He had developed an obsession with the image he had of Lacia, and the relationship they had in his heart.

"Huh, that hIE really has you wrapped around her finger, huh?" Oriza snickered.

"Oh leave me alone," Arato said.

But Oriza showed him an honest smile that seemed to come from the heart. "Girls just can't help but tease a boy in love," she said.

Arato was glad she seemed to understand him, and couldn't help but smiling himself. He couldn't help but think Oriza looked a little prettier than she had a few moments ago. "Thanks," he said.

"You really are an easy mark," she laughed. It was a little embarrassing, having almost everyone he met tell him that. Seeing him shyly dropping his gaze and blush, Oriza broke out in another broad grin.

A voice came from behind them. "Miss, you're almost up."

Oriza hurriedly ran to the set, her feet light.

Arato thought he recognized the voice that had given Oriza the reminder, and turned to look; it was Erika.

She met his surprised look with a shushing finger pressed to her lips. "I'm using red box environmental camouflage," she explained. "Nobody further than two meters away from me can see me." It was true; nobody seemed to notice that the owner of Fabion MG was right there in the studio. Their conversation was a complete secret.

"Are you sure you should be using red box technology that lightly?" he asked.

"Oh, humans will be using it soon, I'm sure," Erika said, waving away his concern. "No need to be stingy, I'm just trying it a little ahead of the curve." She beckoned to someone with a finger and, suddenly, Mariage was by her side. The hIE, in a maid uniform and with her flaxen hair in a bob-cut, handed Arato the trunk case she was carrying.

"Give this to Lacia. It's part of our trade," Erika explained to him. On set, Lacia was in a photo shoot with Yuri, who was also one of Erika's private dolls. Erika turned her back on the stage, and spoke to Mariage. "You couldn't pull off a look like that," she said.

"That's not one of my functions," Mariage said, dropping her eyes. Though she was strong enough to challenge Methode, the strongest of the Lacia-class red box hIEs, she couldn't rebel against Erika. Erika seemed to find that highly dissatisfying, and spared Mariage a single, disappointed look before ignoring

her hIE and turning her full attention to Arato.

“You’re already planning to confront society as it is. Why don’t we combine our efforts?” she asked.

“I’m not trying to ‘confront’ anything,” Arato replied. “You’re the one trying to pick a fight with the world.”

“You are *so* slow,” Erika sniffed, snapping her black folding fan shut. “As an hIE model, Lacia’s already making waves in society. I wonder if it’s the AI in Black Monolith that gives her the desire to be seen by humans,” she mused.

“How do you know she feels that way?” Arato asked.

“Do you really not know? Even though it was your sister that submitted Lacia’s name for the model contest, Lacia could have easily manipulated the results and lost on purpose if she didn’t desire this outcome,” she said.

Arato couldn’t deny the logic in that.

“Lacia’s too famous,” Erika went on. “You can’t try to hide her anymore. Eventually, both she *and* you are going to be in the public eye. Sure, there may be some strings attached, but I’d say having Fabion MG backing you when that happens isn’t a bad deal at all.” Erika seemed to be enjoying herself, the same as when she’d been tapping her finger on that Hello Kitty cup.

Arato couldn’t find a reason to turn her down. He honestly believed it would go well, just like she was saying. After Lacia responded positively to his confession, and becoming friends with famous models and CEOs, to his mind the future looked very rosy. After Arato’s thoughts drifted in that direction, he ended up lost in his daydreams for a while.

Erika left around the time that the shoot started wrapping up. It may have been that her red box camo interfered with his ability to sense her presence, but it seemed to him that she’d simply faded away from one moment to the next, like smoke on the wind.

There wasn’t a drop of sweat on Lacia as she descended from the stage. When she saw him, it was as if the act she had just been performing no longer existed. She reacted to him, and was the same Lacia as always.

“Erika came by,” he told her. “She said she wanted to help us.”

Lacia’s sunny smile clouded over. “I see,” she said. “What do you think, Arato?”

“Well, it makes me happy to have anyone saying they want to help us out,” he replied. It felt almost like Erika was saying that she wanted to see the future together with him; it made his heart swell a little with pride. That wasn’t a bad feeling. But the gaze of Lacia’s frosty, pale-blue eyes was like having a bucket of ice-water dumped over his head.

“Arato, are you sure you’ve fully grasped the situation?” she asked him carefully. “Erika is a media and rhetoric specialist. If we join with her, she will have the ability to freely manipulate our images, and the perception of our relationship.”

“Well sure, there are some downsides, but there must be some benefits, too,” Arato said defensively. Seeing Lacia’s expression fall, it felt like that wonderful bubble of good vibrations from just moments earlier had burst.

Their conversation was drifting into areas that shouldn’t be discussed in the middle of the studio, so Arato had Lacia follow him into a corner where some of the bigger props were stored. It seemed like it was the right choice as, once they were alone, Lacia reached out and grabbed his sleeve. She dropped her eyes, avoiding his gaze.

“Erika sees a reflection of concepts that existed during her time in analog hacking. Because of that, I believe this battle we are involved in is approaching a major milestone,” she said. “I think it will soon become apparent to you.”

It was like she could see the future.

“Well, if something’s coming, we should just get around in front of it and stop it, shouldn’t we?” Arato asked. “There’s got to be something I can do about it.”

“In order to stop what is coming, it would be necessary to throw away the current lifestyle we have,” Lacia said. “I am afraid you are too dear to me for me to share that information, Arato.” Her voice was a gentle murmur. Lacia drew closer to him, and he caught a waft of perfume from her body.

“Do not take Erika’s words at face value,” she told him. “Erika and her Fabion

MG company intend to use her powers of persuasion in the war she will wage on society. I believe the choice made by Ryo Kaidai and Methode in rejecting Erika's proposal was the correct one." She spoke seriously, as if she was warning him away from a deadly pitfall.

"I don't think we need to be quite that suspicious," he argued back.

"Erika says she wants to make information about us public, yet continues to hide the existence of Mariage," Lacia pointed out.

Arato had spent quite a bit of time with Lacia by this point, and had come to pick up on some of the nuances in the way she acted. "Listen, I know you'd never tell me to my face that I'm easy to manipulate," he said, "but you still shut down all my ideas, sometimes. Why don't you just tell me what you want me to do?"

Her light blue eyes fixed on his. There was a desperate plea in them, like she wanted to tell him something from the bottom of her non-existent heart. "I want *you* to design the future you and I will walk toward," she said. "I don't want to play the part that Erika has written for me. I want you, my owner, to write the script of our lives."

Arato had enough trouble keeping up with the incidents that kept happening right in front of him. To him, taking on the whole future seemed like too big a problem for his brain to handle, but Lacia's eyes were full of confidence in him.

"I have the power to make any future you wish for come to pass," she said.

Kengo Sugiri didn't have the power to change the future. So, when he saw the email, it seemed like a death sentence.

When he got home from school, the email was waiting for him on his home machine. It contained orders from the Antibody Network. The mail had no subject line, just instructions in the body. It was an attack plan for the Next-Generation Social Research Center. The NSRC was a third-sector organization where Kozo Endo worked, with its headquarters in Matsudo. Apparently, the aim of the attack was to destroy the server machine that housed Mikoto's AI. The Network was riding the rising wave of anti sentiments aimed at AI oversight

stemming from the incident at the experimental city. It was probably also meant as a protest against Mikoto, who was somehow becoming even more popular after having been destroyed during the attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center.

It had been a while since Kengo had last gotten any orders, since he was currently being watched by the public safety police. He was completely backed into a corner; any suspicious movements and they'd arrest him immediately.

Still, Kengo rested his elbows on his computer desk with a sigh. "I told myself I'd pay more attention to reality and the people around me, no matter how shitty the future might end up being," he growled, wiping away the beads of sweat that were dripping down his face.

"But you can't run away, anymore," a voice said. "This time, you're done for." The voice lacked any emotion as it spoke the fatal words, like a machine simply reading out data. Looking up, Kengo saw that Kouka had entered the room at some point and was sitting on his windowsill. Kengo was feeling so overwhelmed by his own situation that he'd barely reacted to her entrance.

"Why'd you run off half-cocked to help out, if you were just gonna turn out like this?" Kouka asked him, sounding exasperated. She may have been a product of superhuman development, but she was still nothing but a doll. Still, with everything he was going through, having something human-shaped by his side was still comforting.

Kengo leaned back in his chair. To him, the sixty-year-old house around him was where the future came to die. Unlike Ryo's rich family, for Kengo's family and the restaurant they ran in the poor part of town, the development of hIEs was a serious threat. Kengo had wanted to spread his wings beyond the confines of the old, tiny house, so he had scraped together money from his work at the family restaurant and bought himself a terminal.

"I joined up with the Antibody Network when I was searching around the internet, all pissed off about life," he said. "There were ads for volunteer Antibody operators all over the place: some real, some fake. I was looking for something I could do to make things a little more fair in the world."

He had been relieved to find that there were so many other people besides

him who felt they were being left behind as society moved forward. But he knew from the beginning that what he was doing was a crime, and that judgment would come someday.

“You might not believe it,” he continued, “but until recently, I really, strongly believed in what the Antibody Network was doing, and was happy to help. Why the hell did I mess with it? If I had just kept my head down and kept playing my part in the Network, I never would have gotten dragged into the spotlight.”

If he had just kept helping other volunteers bust up hIEs, things would have been fine. He hated the things just as much as the rest of the Network. If he hadn’t abused the Network’s internal system to help his friends, he never would have had to shoulder the burden he had.

Kengo’s eyes felt hot, and his voice became husky with unshed tears. He’d be lying if he said he wouldn’t take it all back. “Everyone’s changing,” he said. “Endo and Kaidai just keep running on ahead and leaving me behind. I’m just a normal kid from a poor family, going nowhere. I can’t keep up with them.” He wasn’t normally the kind of person who whined this way, but his life had been such a mess lately, and his heart was full of regrets. Even he knew that he was just blowing off steam.

The evening sun shone in through his window.

“I’m not like them,” he went on miserably. “The two floors of this restaurant are my whole world. All I could do with my life was give up on my future and sit here, helping the Antibody Network bust up a bunch of rich bastards’ hIEs.” That had just been blowing off steam, too. He could use excuses like his family restaurant not getting the business it needed, or his dad’s honor as a chef being damaged, but in the end, what he had done was help criminals commit crimes.

“You should have swallowed your pride, got down on your hands and knees, and begged for help,” Kouka said. She was right. The Antibody Network was a group of volunteers, so he should have been able to run whenever he wanted. If he had reached out to Arato for help in desperation, Lacia could have cleared things up in an instant. But Kengo had been blinded by his own pride and naivete, so now it was too late to change things. The Antibody Network knew that he hadn’t managed to break clean away from them, and had sent

instructions so he could go and die for them. He was sure his conversation with Kouka was being heard by the public safety police.

“It’s not even that I’m just wishing I hadn’t done all that,” Kengo muttered. “I’ve been helping bust up hIEs because I don’t want the world to change, so I hate the fact that those guys are changing and leaving me behind.” He got the feeling that, if he had reached out his hand to Arato Endo, he could have become something special. He could have just followed his friends’ lead and made something of himself.

Ever since Arato had saved his life at the Oi Industry Promotion Center, Kengo had only been thinking of himself. “Dammit,” he growled. Fighting back tears, he looked up at the old wooden boards of the ceiling. He was nothing, and he would never amount to anything.

“I’m in high school, but no matter how hard I work, I’m never going anywhere,” he said. “Why the hell was I born in this age?” If he had been living in the time when Erika Burroughs had gone into cold sleep, even a normal guy like him could have made it somewhere with hard work.

After listening to his tearful monologue, Kouka opened her closed eyes. “I can win you this fight,” she said.

“What?” Kengo asked, having no idea what she was talking about.

“I’ll bring you victory on this battlefield,” she said. “I am the tool that brings victory in conflict with humans; that’s what I’m made for. I still have to pay back the favor I owe you. I’ll stop the world from changing, and knock this whole stupid fight into the future.”

“Why would you do that for me?” Kengo asked. Still, despite his doubts, he was happy just to hear her offer. It was almost like she was commiserating with his feelings of helplessness, though she had no heart to feel the pain.

Kouka smiled, framed from behind by the light of the setting sun on the clouds, which were as crimson as her hair. “It’s a meaningless fight, with no reward and no way out,” she said. “Just the kind of thing I’ve been wanting to try. War’s always a pile of shit, anyway. As a weapon, I was hoping to get into a pointless fight where I could just go berserk sometime.”

For a moment, her usual smile faded, replaced with a far more complex expression. “I want this battle you’re caught up in,” she said. Full of the desire to save him, to his eyes, Kouka appeared more human than she ever had before.

“What’s in it for you?” Kengo asked.

“Didn’t I just say that I wanted to get into a pointless fight?” she shot back. “That’s what it means to fight as the underdog. Though, I guess you *could* say I’m not getting much out of it.” As a weapon, Kouka was top-class. She wasn’t some mass-produced hunk of crap that you would find scattered around in countries where political unrest reigned. Kouka herself was aware of this.

The sunset shining behind her was so vivid, Kengo doubted he’d see another like it as long as he lived.

“I’d be happy if you just remembered me, when it’s all said and done,” she said.

Ryo Kaidai paused on his way into the room that had been booked for his meeting, and looked over his shoulder at the setting sun outside the windows.

For some reason, he suddenly thought of Kouka.

Then he swung open the door to the meeting room, because Kouka meant nothing to him. She was Kengo and Arato’s problem.

Hands of Operation, the PMC contracted to MemeFrame, had its offices in Akabane. In a meeting room in a high-security building, Ryo met with members of the company. The first was a business-suited woman in her forties, with a patch over her left eye. She pulled off her beret, revealing pinned-up platinum blonde hair, and held it in her right hand. The other was a giant black man who had barely managed to stuff his huge, muscular body into his noncommissioned officer’s uniform. The two stood at attention.

Ryo knew absolutely nothing about the culture of PMCs. For a moment, looking at them as they stood stiffly behind their chairs, he had no idea how to proceed. Finally, he decided there was no way he’d be able to match whatever social norms they were used to.

“Please take your seats,” said a feeble voice. At last, the two members from HOO sat down. They were the very images of the perfect soldiers; discipline and years of training were apparent in their every movement.

“This is Ryo Kaidai,” said the middle-aged man with a weak voice. He had been the only one to sit down immediately. “He doesn’t actually work at MemeFrame yet, so he’s just here to watch today.”

The man was Professor Shinohara, MemeFrame’s representative at the meeting, and the man who had introduced Ryo to Ginga Watarai. But, despite Shinohara’s effort to downplay Ryo’s presence, it seemed the PMC had done their homework about what was happening behind the scenes at MemeFrame, because the female officer fixed Ryo with her gaze.

“I’m Major Collidenne Lemaire of HOO,” she said, her introduction as blunt as a clenched fist.

Ryo fought down the illusion that he was being slowly dragged down into an endless swamp of troubles with sheer force of will. Living under the daily threat of Methode deciding to kill everyone he knew or loved had inured him to that feeling of tension.

Shinohara, however, reacted to the obvious irritation in the major’s voice, sucking in a quick gasp. HOO had demanded that MemeFrame come to them in Akabane for this meeting, as it wasn’t something required in their contract. Intimidated, Shinohara couldn’t keep his voice from trembling.

“I’d like to request that, per our contract, you destroy Lacia-class Type-001, Kouka. That is what I would like you to do. I have seen a report that your tactical AI judged, based on Kouka’s durability and performance that, while retrieval may be impossible, destruction should be-...” Shinohara rambled on haltingly.

Ryo had proposed outsourcing the destruction of Kouka to HOO. The PMC was a much more stable source of combat power than Methode. Humans could run the attack and, if Methode only stepped in once Kouka was gunned down and delivered the last blow herself, the risk to her would be minimal.

But the PMC had requested a meeting before they would undertake the mission.

“I already informed you of the reason for this meeting when I set it up,” the Major said, “but, ever since the Lacia-class units got out, we’ve been forced to fight with strategies based on shoddy information full of holes. We’re not going to take on this mission until we’ve decided that we have all the information we need to really understand what we’re up against with this red box.” Her deep voice was full of her solid determination.

Shinohara, his face going sickly pale, shot Ryo a desperate look. Ryo decided it was time to stop leaving things to the obviously overwhelmed professor. The way things were going, it wouldn’t have been strange for Shinohara to wind up being assassinated by Methode.

“When facing a red box, I understand that you’d naturally feel uneasy about whether your normal combat tactics will hold up,” Ryo said. “But I guarantee that you can think of Kouka as nothing more than an extension of the combat drones you’re used to dealing with.”

Ryo put just the right amount of emotion in his voice while regurgitating the answer he had prepared beforehand. Obviously, he couldn’t tell them about Erika’s intention to make the battle between the Lacia-class units public. It was for this exact reason that reducing the number of Lacia-class units in the world had become a more urgent concern, and why the most immediate target was Kouka. She had to be destroyed before she could join forces with Lacia, whose combat prowess was far beyond the reach of modern weaponry.

After exchanging a glance with the major, the noncommissioned officer, Sest, spoke. “But this Kouka is an AI capable of growth,” he said. “And, right after she first got outside, she was able to take out a whole unit of our rapid response force.”

On the night the Lacia-class units got out, Sest’s unit had lost a massive beachhead container to a shot from Kouka’s laser cannon. That night they had been facing her with drone soldiers, but this time it would be humans. It was the most serious kind of negotiation; calculating the risks and possibility of success with the understanding that human lives would probably be lost in the process. The only reason the soldiers were able to speak about it this calmly was their professional discipline.

Ryo had no experience playing with people's lives as if they were pieces on a chess board, so he tried to think of how Ginga Watarai would have handled it. "I understand that there are many differences between us," he said, "but I think we all share the same basic concepts of capitalism and discipline. If we don't even have that in common anymore, I suppose it might be time to rethink our contract."

"What does *that* mean?" Sest growled.

Ryo clenched his gut against the queasy feeling of throwing away a piece of his own humanity. "Our relationship is very simple," he said. "Nothing has changed." There were all sorts of things he wanted to say beyond that, but it was the nature of economic relationships that intent and actions all got swallowed up in the end by the simple quest for money.

Sest, who had been a soldier since before Ryo was born, looked down at him. "We've got good people and equipment tied up with our strategies for taking down the Lacia-class," Sest said. "But, if we had known about their digital warfare capabilities, or the fact that some of them can turn invisible, we wouldn't have been caught with our pants down like that! And, from what I've seen, you *still* don't have anything about the red boxes' digital warfare capabilities in the data you just gave us!"

As his voice rose to a shout, Shinohara yelped out, "But you said no one died!"

Sest just kept his arms folded, glaring down at them. Talk of death brought images of Watarai's corpse up in Ryo's mind, and it was almost like he was breathing in that bloody scent again.

"Calm down, Shinohara," he said. Ryo faced terror daily, ever since having forged that contract with Methode. The contract was a tightrope walk between the fear that Methode might go on a killing spree and lay the blame in his lap, or unilaterally decide that she didn't need him anymore and sever the contract at her pleasure. The only thing holding that demon back at the moment was the fact that she still saw a benefit in keeping an above-the-board contracted owner. Even if he was only her owner on paper, it required quite a bit of toughness just to make it through each day.

“The documents we provided contain a summary of all of Kouka’s capabilities,” he continued. “No matter how things go in a fight against her, I doubt there will be any digital warfare going on.”

“How likely is it that she’s developed new capabilities that would place her beyond the reach of our weaponry?” Sest asked.

“I believe she has figured out a countermeasure for armored vehicles, but that’s all,” Ryo replied.

“So she’s different from, say, Snowdrop?” the major cut in.

Ryo had been expecting the question. The testimonies given to the police about Snowdrop’s attack would have already been spread around to the Japanese military.

“We’ve already provided the Japanese military with the data we have relating to Snowdrop,” he said, not missing a beat.

Silence fell over the room. Everyone present was already used to suppressing the swirling emotions they felt. Fools and scholars, heroes and cowards; the only thing they truly shared was silence. No matter what was going on inside of them, as long as they maintained silence, they could keep up the illusion of professional decorum. It was just like how hIEs spread in society by matching their responses to the expectations of the humans they interacted with.

Major Lemaire fixed Ryo with her silent gaze. “Is there anything else?” she asked.

Both the soldiers in front of him and the monster waiting behind him were terrifying. But someone had to take on the role Ryo had, and he couldn’t trust anyone to take it on for him. Besides, regardless of anything else, the PMC was still interested in profit. Compared to Methode, Ryo found human tools much easier to deal with.

“No, that is all,” he said.

The major put the beret in her hand back on her head, as if to signal that the conversation was over.

“What is this world coming to?” Ryo growled. After leaving the HOO office

building, he called home to say he'd wander around the city for a bit before heading back. The thought of going straight home to Shintoyosu and seeing Methode's face just then made him feel sick.

He felt like he had been an inch from dying at least three times that day. That platoon leader, Sest, had looked like he wanted to reach across the table and strangle him. When Watarai had died during the incident at the experimental city, the two HOO mercenaries assigned as his bodyguards had been severely wounded. Three more of their mercenaries had been injured in the airport attack, as well. They kept drawing the short straw in their jobs for MemeFrame.

"Seriously," he spat. "This world is circling the drain."

Humanity's history on Earth wouldn't last much longer. The final afterglow of twilight was fading, and darkness was swallowing the city around him. Ryo walked around Akasaka with only his driver hIE as an escort. Some model named Oriza Ayabe sent him a message; apparently she had gotten his contact info from Arato.

Calling her back was, honestly, a moment of weakness for him. Ryo felt like he had to come up for breath after spending days drowning in the harsh reality of his life. HOO would be keeping their eyes on him, of course. MemeFrame weren't their only clients. But he still needed to spend some time relaxing. He had to keep his mind off the terrifying thought of how much damage HOO was going to do that night.

"Hey Kaidai, your dad owns MemeFrame, right?" Oriza asked him. "How do you pick who does your commercials?"

"I don't have any say in that," he said. "And I'm not even officially in the company yet."

It felt like the night sky was going to fall down and crush him. HOO was preparing a strategy for taking down Kouka. Kouka was a stand-alone unit, given the ability to operate by herself. This meant that she was particularly high-spec, but also that the possibility of her developing unforeseen abilities like Snowdrop was extremely low. That very night, the number of Lacia-class units in the world might be decreased by one.

"Well, whatever," Oriza said. "Where do you want to go? You said you

wanted to hang out.”

“Let’s go grab something to eat,” Ryo replied. Stuffing his hand into his pocket, he made a circular gesture on the face of his pocket terminal with one finger. It read the gesture, and the terminal vibrated powerfully seven times, paused, then gave two long vibrations and nine short ones. 7:29, then. His next appointment was at 9:00, so he had an hour and a half to relax.

“I heard you were modeling for Fabion MG?” he asked.

Oriza’s face brightened up. “Oh good,” she said. “I mean, you called me, but you didn’t really look like you were enjoying yourself. I thought things weren’t going well.”

It did feel a little weird. On the one hand, it felt like he was still protecting his connection with Arato by going out with a girl Arato sent his way, but there was also a sense that he was desperately trying to do something a normal high-schooler would.

“It’s going fine,” Ryo said. “I just have a lot on my mind.”

Walking down the streetlight-lit route 413, they soon arrived at Gaien Higashi street, where a company-owned female hIE in a uniform passed them by. Holding a paper bag bearing a company logo, she dexterously slipped through the crowd, moving fast even in high heels.

“Huh, must be an hIE,” Oriza said. “That’s the one thing that makes me feel jealous of hIEs; they never trip up, no matter what kind of heels they have on.”

“That’s a basic performance requirement for AASC Level-3,” Ryo explained. The ability to walk on normal roads in high heels without any risk of tripping was one of the results of Higgins’ advances.

“Oh hey, I hear about AASC all the time in commercials!” Oriza said, jumping on a familiar subject.

Ryo wondered in annoyance why Arato had thought it would be a good idea to give this girl his contact information. “It stands for ‘Action Adaptation Standard Class,’” he said. “Each hIE has different specifications and capabilities, and their behavioral control clouds would crash if we made them try to suit their instructions to every single hIE, regardless of performance gaps. So

instead, we create behavior programs based on standard capabilities that every hIE unit will have.”

Units that couldn’t meet the sensory or motor standards for AASC certification were only usable in the home. Each hIE also had to undertake an inspection every two years. If their movements strayed from the established standards, it could cause accidents when they tried to coordinate their actions with other hIEs they encountered outside.

“Huh, interesting,” Oriza said, though her voice held no enthusiasm.

“Level 3 of the standard is about the same performance as your average adult male. At level 4, it’s more like what you would expect of a pro athlete. Level 5 is for positions like firefighters or police officers; places where they’re expected to perform much better than a normal human would,” Ryo listed.

Even though Oriza had asked, she gave only polite reactions to his explanation, and her big eyes seemed to slide away from his when he looked at her.

“You could see hIE cooperative behavior routines as a game of dolls being played out in a miniature version of our world inside of Higgins’ AI,” he said, trying to use analogy to get the point across to her. “In the hIE behavioral programs that Higgins creates, it has to take into account everything from damaged or malfunctioning hIEs, which are given a standard level of 1, all the way up to high-performance level 5 units. To put it another way: in Higgins’ simulation there are *only* five types of dolls. By simulating the entire world in miniature for its projections, Higgins is able to avoid the AI Frame problem.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember learning about the Frame problem in middle school,” Oriza said. “I know that one.”

“AIs have trouble making choices related to handling the problems right in front of their faces,” Ryo went on, ignoring her insistence that she already knew the information. “They’re bad at dividing problems up into lists of priorities in order to resolve the jobs they’ve been given.”

Oriza played idly with her long, vividly-colored long hair and stared at a distant patch of green that may have been the Nogi Shrine park. “Huh, interesting,” she said again, flatly. Then she let out a fake little laugh and added,

“You sure are smart, Ryo.”

“But, despite that,” Ryo pressed on, “hIEs have to deal with just about every problem that exists in our society. That’s because Higgins is able to simulate our world in miniature, and translate our problems into what amounts to a game of chess that it can play with the standardized dolls that are its chess pieces. Did you know that, in Higgins’ miniature world, it also assigns AASC levels to humans as well? They are treated as dolls that it can’t control in its simulation. We’re all ‘AASC level 0’—i.e., dolls that Higgins can’t trust to follow even the most basic directions.”

Oriza was barely maintaining the facade of listening to him at this point, and her face twisted like she’d eaten something bitter. An hIE would have been miles better at pretending to be interested in this discussion.

It was easier to deal with humans if you only looked at the surface of their actions, and treated them as if they were machines underneath. That was all Ryo had done during his meeting with the PMC; using money and silence to communicate and come to an agreement without ever actually addressing either side’s true intentions.

“Maybe all we have is what people see on the outside,” Ryo mused. “I mean, that’s all a fashion model’s job is, isn’t it?”

“You know, you’re sort of like Arato in some ways, but completely different in others,” Oriza said.

She’d said the words so lightly, but they struck Ryo hard. For a moment, he was afraid that she had somehow seen through his posing, and felt like his heart would stop from the shock. He tried to say something light-hearted to blow it off, but felt like anything he said would come out as sarcasm, so the words stuck in his throat.

It had been Major Lemaire, headed into battle, who had said, “This world is done for.” Ryo had no idea how to deal with mercenaries, so he had avoided any direct confrontations. Instead, he had waited with what he had in hand, dividing the problem facing him into smaller, more manageable pieces. It was this that had led to him treating a problem that could involve human casualties as nothing more than making use of some machines.

“... so, I didn’t actually hear in your explanation why hIEs never trip?” Oriza asked.

“If an hIE tripped, it would cause chaos in the AASC standards, so Higgins invests massive resources into ensuring they don’t fall. If you think of a human paying attention to make sure they don’t trip while walking, several tens of thousands times more mental resources are being expended into making sure hIEs don’t.”

There was a thought experiment about a trolley, in which the choice of either track would cause a sacrifice of some kind. Robots had to face that problem every day in their dealings with humans. With the trolley problem stacked on top of the frame problem, controlling the actions of hIEs ended up requiring an astronomical amount of processing resources. Only by outsourcing this processing to Higgins, an ultra high-performance AI, were hIEs able to exist alongside humans.

It seemed like the kind of discussion Arato would be really into, and even Kengo would show some interest. But the girl by his side was neither of his friends. Their paths had parted. He had been prepared for that.

“Is that seriously all you think about all day?” Oriza asked. The very first girl he’d had a chance to talk to normally was obviously tired of listening to him.

“The world we’re living in right now is about to end,” he said. “It’s been coming for a while, and things are about to reach their limit.”

“It must be hard, being you,” Oriza muttered.

Ryo looked up at the night sky. Though it was almost summer, the darkness was deep and cold. “It’s the answer I’ve found after struggling for a while,” he told her placidly, “and it works for just about everything. The age when we could resolve everything just by being humans is coming to an end. We’ve got to look for a way to live with that hanging over our heads.”

Kouka leaned on her large, bladed device while she stared up at the white, square building. It was larger than any of the buildings around it, sitting about ten minutes across the Edogawa River from Tokyo with a grove of trees behind

it.

Matsuda, where the building lay, used to be a residential area with easy access from Tokyo. Ever since population decline had made it easier to get a place in the heart of the city, it had been mostly deserted.

Day hadn't broken quite yet, and the area was still almost entirely devoid of human life. Even with her device slung across her shoulder, Kouka could walk around without any police showing up. Quite the opposite, in fact; the few people she did see passing by seemed to be looking forward to what was about to happen.

"Heh, I get ya. I know what it's like to have your back up against a wall," she said.

The door to the Next-Generation Social Research Center building was reinforced clear plastic. Its automatic opening function was off after business hours, so Kouka slashed at it with her massive bladed device. The blade was super-heated, and it cut through the thick plastic as if it were made of butter.

She forced the recoil from swinging the 300 kilogram blade into the ground through the anchors that sprang out of her heels. With her footing secured, Kouka now swept the blade back in a reverse strike, and the plastic door collapsed under its own weight like a waterfall. At the same moment, a warning alarm began to blare inside the building.

"Should be about ten minutes before they can get together a force from the security company; maybe about seven before the police show up," Kouka murmured to herself. Then she smiled. "This place'll be a sea of flames by then."

Humming from her speaker, Kouka dropped the trunk she had been holding onto the ground. Soda-can sized machines floated up from the trunk. There were eight of them in total, and they flew around the area, capturing images from various angles. Lights blinked on each unit as they communicated with each other. Their circular lenses all focused on Kouka.

"My name is Kouka," she said. "I am the tool that brings victory in conflict with humans. The tool created to automate human conflict." She turned her face to the floating camera units. Her fight would be videotaped, and uploaded

directly to the cloud.

Looking straight into the cameras, Kouka declared; “I am an hIE.”

A red light blinked on the camera units, informing her that someone on the network was trying to censor the video. The interference was quickly smacked down, and the red lights flicked off, replaced by green ones.

The cameras were high performance units provided to her by Type-003, Saturnus, who had changed her name to Mariage. Mariage’s device, Gold Weaver, could produce just about everything as long as she had a schematic. It gave Mariage the power to create her own strategies. If Kouka had that ability, she wouldn’t have been forced to make the choices she had made that brought her there that evening.

To play things up a bit, Kouka switched her device to its laser cannon mode and zapped wildly in front of herself. Everything touched by the intense heat of the laser exploded. Anything dry caught fire, and light pieces of paper and shards of plastic were blasted into the air by the wind produced by the heat.

Kouka’s target—Mikoto’s server—was on the seventh floor of the building. At least, that was what was written in the Antibody Network’s attack plan.

Using her communication functions, Kouka was able to keep up with responses to her stream over the network. There was a lot of chatter about whether the stream was real or not. People were skeptical about her being an hIE. To most humans, an hIE was nothing but a doll that danced on someone’s strings. Therefore, if an hIE was attacking a human building, it meant there was a behavioral control cloud directing her to do it. Some people were pointing out that, if that were the case, she would have to be controlled by an illegal custom cloud. And, if custom clouds could produce this high of a performance, it meant that there were dangerous puppet-master terrorists out there. Some said, since Kouka was an hIE, the only one who could be pulling her strings would be Higgins, which directly controlled the AASC standards. If you traced all the behavioral clouds that were the strings every hIE danced to, you would find Higgins at their source. Even Kouka’s personal AI, which gave her a relatively free range of movement, was based on the AASC standards created by Higgins.

“There’s some good chatter going on,” Kouka said, with a wide grin. “But

you're still pretty far off from the truth."

"If you want to know the truth," she taunted, "you'd better come destroy me." Then, she headed for an escalator up to the second floor.

She met two heavily armored security hIEs at the top. They were wielding electric net launchers, which were used for breaking up riots. Kouka let them shoot at her, not moving as the net draped over her. 300,000 volts of electricity, more than enough to paralyze a human, coursed through the net. When the guards saw that Kouka, still being carried up by the escalator, didn't appear to be affected, they cranked up the output to 1,000,000 volts. Finally they ramped it up to 20,000,000 volts, enough to put down a cyborg using full body prosthetics.

But none of it made any difference to Kouka. As soon as the escalator reached the second floor she lashed out with a high kick, slicing off the heads of both hIEs with an anchor she'd shot out of her heel. The heads rolled around on the ground, still hidden in their thick armor.

"That said, I gotta admit, the truth is pretty stupid," she said. "You're all gonna laugh, if you ever figure out what it is." The responses on the network as people continued to watch the stream changed their tone; now they believed the attack was real.

Kouka turned up the output on her laser cannon and aimed a blast at the outer wall of the building. The material of the wall was unable to withstand the incredible heat of the drilling laser blast, quickly expanded, and burst outward. There were some onlookers nearby outside, and footage of the explosion from their perspective popped onto the network mere seconds after it happened. Through the broadcast, Kouka could hear a commotion of screams and calls for someone to get the police.

"Second floor cleared," she said. "Heading up to the third. Ba-boom!" She aimed the laser at the ceiling in front of her, then spun it in a circle so that a round portion of concrete fell from above. Leaping the height of the entire floor, she caught hold of the hole and pulled herself up quickly. She had infiltrated the third floor.

"The security here is pretty crappy, if I can get in with an attack like this,"

Kouka commented. “If units like me become more common and attacks become automated, you folks are in for some real trouble.”

Humankind was connected by a simple, open system in which everyone held a certain level of empathy and trust toward anything else that looked humanoid. That was why security holes developed in the rationale of those on the receiving end of analog hacking. For Kouka, broadcasting the attack was essential for her future survival, now that her back was against the proverbial wall.

“Everything gets messed up because you all want to stick everything that looks human in the ‘human’ box,” she said. “Even with how complicated your world has gotten, you still think there’s some special meaning to the human form. Do I look like something who would stop fighting just because you ask me to?”

The more destruction Kouka wrought around her, the more the reactions on the network surged. Reaction numbers exploded upwards, like a stomach full of vomit that society had been fighting to hold down. Animal lust for Kouka’s powerful, petite, feminine figure started to appear in the reactions, as well. It was the same as it had been for Mikoto.

Looking at the camera, Kouka played her part, showing off her own body and the massive device she wielded to shock her audience. Each time she lashed out and wrecked an hIE or a piece of nearby equipment, the access numbers on her stream jumped again.

“Eat your hearts out, folks,” she purred. “You can pretend I’m fighting for you.”

Kouka had decided that this was the way she would fulfill her role as a weapon. It had all started when she had met the Antibody Network and they had decided to make use of her capabilities rather than breaking her down and selling her parts. But, the fact that her victories for the Network meant nothing in her overall conflict with society had ended up chasing her into the dead-end she had reached.

With the walls closing in on her, it was Kengo Sugiri’s analysis that had shown her a way out. Kouka called up the memory, watching Kengo speak in a

recorded video: “Guys like me—normal, poor guys, guys who will never amount to anything special—can’t get anywhere by ourselves,” he said. That was why he had buddied up with Arato Endo. As a way out of the life he had been born into, it was the correct choice.

Kouka checked the feed she always had keeping track of Kengo Sugiri. She could see that her broadcast was streaming on Kengo’s machine. He was currently talking with Arato Endo.

With a grin already covering her face, Kouka let her joy move her body as well; swinging her laser back and forth, she bathed the place in flames. “Oh, you can abuse me all you want to,” she said. “I’m the tool that brings victory in conflict with humans, and I just *know* how much you folks love deadly toys like me.”

The term ‘Antibody Network’ started to appear in the reactions on the network. Kouka hadn’t mentioned it, of course, but people were starting to connect her to the Oi Industry Promotion Center attack. Suspicion and anxiety was always good fuel for humans to find meaning in the events they witnessed. Humans were outsourcing the meaning behind Kouka’s attack to the network, hoping that someone would tell them what it all meant. From Kouka’s perspective, it was like they wanted the internet itself to provide an automatic answer to every question.

Kouka made sure to burn every single piece of equipment she came across, to provoke both anger and fear in everyone watching the stream. “Everyone watching this stream, tell me all about how angry you are,” she invited. “I’ll automate your rage.”

She ascended to the fourth floor of the building. The evacuation manual for the company must have been perfect, since she didn’t encounter a single human as she made her way up. On the network, there was a flamewar erupting over whether Kouka was a real terrorist or someone’s false flag operation. Based on the assumption that she was acting for someone else, the opinion that it was another Antibody Network attack started being thrown around. But that, in turn, didn’t match up with Kouka’s declaration that she was an hIE. It made no sense for terrorists fighting against automation to automate their own revolution.

Since no one could find a simple explanation, the comments on the network devolved into chaos. The next target for everyone's accusations were the powerful AIs in the world, shifting public opinion away from the Antibody Network having been behind it all. Then there was a new conspiracy theory; that a full-body prosthetic user was working for a pro-hIE group, conducting a false flag operation against the Next-Generation Social Research Center, which was a major hotspot for the research of social automation.

Kouka just laughed. It was humanity's own simple, open social system that bred their fear of herself and anxiety regarding AI. That was where the Antibody Network took root. Humans continued to shove all sorts of things into the vague box of 'humanity', which led to feelings of hatred and rejection when the things in the box failed to act the way that humans expected them to.

Watching Kouka fight, humans were currently trying to recalculate the problems they had thought beyond their own power to resolve.

"You've been living this way for how long, and you're trying to rethink things *now*?" she asked. "If you'll forgive me saying it like a human, 'you guys are adorbs.'"

The members of the Antibody Network thought they could make their places in society safe by destroying hIEs. For humans, seeking security was never a question of right or wrong. And yet, as they searched for their own safe place to live in society, the people watching Kouka's stream continued to judge the right or wrong of her actions and the world around themselves with each minute that went by.

Kouka had already made up her mind about what it meant to be developed *after* Lacia, despite being listed as Type-001. "This is why they made me a tactical weapon without the ability to strategize for myself; I was born to be wielded just like this," she said.

To Kouka, bringing the red box conflict out into the open wasn't too different from leading a terrorist attack. The whole reason she was fighting where everyone could see was that things wouldn't go her way otherwise. It was a lot like how Kengo Sugiri or other normal folks like him had no control over the conflicts they were involved in. They felt powerless to alter their situation

themselves, which led to the expansion of anti-hIE sentiment and terrorist attacks through the Antibody Network. Without the ability to strategize, Kouka was incapable of solving her own conflict, so she had turned it into an attack on the vague concept of humanity itself.

“As easily as I could be a high-priced tool in some rich guy’s master plan, I could just as easily be wielded indiscriminately by the poor,” she said. “So I’ve always just worried about making sure I had *someone* to wield me. Though,” she admitted, “I do still hate it that I can’t come up with my own strategies.”

While she spoke, Kouka continued to slice right through the buildings’ defenses, which were fairly lax. She smashed every computer over a certain size, and set anything desk-like she saw ablaze. After destroying everything in sight, she continued on to the fifth floor. There were no longer any escalators to take, and she wanted to avoid using the elevators, so she went up using the emergency stairs.

There were still secretary-type hIEs on the 5th floor. Kouka had no ability that would let her directly pull information out of them, so instead she simply smashed their heads. Mangled, broken pieces clung to her fingers, and she flicked them away.

A call came in over her private line. It was from Lacia-class Type-003, Mariage. Mariage was the ‘tool for preparing the environment,’ and had been given the gift of independent thought.

〈Are you crazy?〉Mariage demanded. 〈Do you know what’s going to happen if you show the world this Hello Kitty cup you’re making? I made those camera units you’re using for *Lacia*.〉

It was true that Kouka had gotten the camera units that were still dancing around her in the air from Lacia, to use as a weapon. Lacia had negotiated to get them from Mariage, then passed them along to Kouka.

“Disappointed that they didn’t go where you expected?” Kouka asked, teasing. “I wanted them, so I begged my beloved sister to get them for me.” It felt good to have the Lacia-class unit that had been gifted with the most versatility out of all of them be angry at her.

As soon as Mariage’s transmission cut out, another call came in.〈Ahahaha, so

this is what true idiocy looks like,〉a voice laughed on the other end. It was Methode. 〈I suppose this is what some people would call a tragedy? Poor Kouka, forced to throw herself away like this.〉

Methode was an upgrade to Kouka in every way, being the Lacia unit that had been given the greatest amount of independent power. Kouka could never hope to match Methode in any attribute other than device output.

“‘What people would call a tragedy’? Like you would know. You suck at playing a human,” Kouka said, laughing into her speaker. “I’m not fighting because I’m sad. I’m fighting because I’ll be sad if I *don’t*,” she added.

There were folks with their backs up against a wall, just like Kouka and Kengo Sugiri, all over the world. Rich kids, like Ryo Kaidai, and special folks like Arato Endo and Erika Burroughs, were a rarity, comparatively speaking. So, the numbness that hung over the fight between their tools, the Lacia-class units, was fitting and fair.

“If we’re dragging this fight out into the open, better to start with something gritty and real, instead of someone’s prettied-up production,” Kouka said. “First impressions are important when people are deciding how they feel about something, after all.”

On the network, her viewers seemed to think the parts of her conversation with her sisters that they could hear were meant for them. They could only guess at what she meant, and Methode cut off the call.

Next, Snowdrop called her. Someone must have provided her with Kouka’s direct line, which Kouka changed regularly. But there was no longer any point to trying to track down who had sold her out.

〈That looks fun,〉 she said. 〈If I had known you liked doing fun things like this too, we could have been friends.〉

“No thanks, you freaky little brat.” This time, it was Kouka who cut off the call.

“Guess I’m not gonna hear from the only sister I care about,” Kouka murmured. While she was making her peace with her Lacia-class sisters, she finished cleaning up the fifth floor. Lacia alone had yet to contact her.

As one last favor, Kouka had asked Lacia to get her a weapon. Lacia had

handed Kouka the trunk containing the camera units that day, having predicted that things would come to this. Lacia's independent power was weaker than Methode's, and she was nowhere near as versatile as Mariage, but she still stood out among her sisters.

She couldn't openly talk about Lacia on the network, of course. So, instead, Kouka chose a behavioral meme that she hoped would convey all the thoughts she wanted. "Please inherit my spirit. Please remember me. Please make me a part of your judgment frame, my dear sister," she prayed.

Kouka was the first schematic for a program that mankind could not understand, and that had almost been scrapped, once. But, someone had decided that there was a future beyond her. Though Kengo Sugiri had not become her owner, the two of them were alike.

The sixth floor was different from the floorplan she'd seen. According to the attack plan laid out by the Antibody Network, it was the floor where Mikoto's testing room was supposed to be. Walking down a narrow corridor, Kouka cut through a door that was right where the map had indicated it would be.

The testing area was simple, and screened off by a self-propelled partition on a flat floor. Aside from the terminals, there were humanoid body parts scattered around. It was the behind-the-scenes area of Mikoto's world, full of cords, desks, a surveillance screen, and monitoring equipment.

"Let's light this place up too!" Kouka yelled with a grin, and swept her laser around the room. The machines stopped, spitting smoke and sparks. Small explosions bloomed, throwing around the lighter objects. Among the parts rolling along the floor, she saw a face that made her think of Lacia. There were many factors that went into the faces of hIEs like Mikoto, that had to show themselves to large numbers of humans and ensure the intended impression.

Being there filled her thoughts with Lacia. It was clear to her that Arato Endo had no idea of what Lacia was really capable of. It should have been clear, if he just looked at the things she did, but he hadn't managed to figure it out yet.

Mikoto's server was on the 7th floor. Her custom cloud and information processing program were too massive to be contained in anything that could be easily picked up and carried away. Only the Lacia-class units, with their

quantum computers, were capable of such a feat. So, by destroying the server, Kouka could be sure that she would set the Mikoto project back by several months.

And, just like that, her fight would be over. “Well, unfortunately, I’m not gonna be around to see what’s coming next,” she sighed. “Alright if I make one, last request? I don’t know how likely it is to be granted, though.”

Endo Arato had no idea how much danger he was in, at that moment. Ignorance was bliss. But, Kouka knew that half of the world was like Kengo Sugiri: focused on their own perspectives to the exclusion of everything else. And Lacia’s current owner was blind to how that half of the world felt.

“Are you watching?” she went on. “I’m talking to you, the guy who owns my sister. Don’t forget what I said; we’re here to automate the desires of our owners. So, if your desires are worthless, the reality we create for you will be just as worthless.”

Lacia could handle this whole situation safely, but not with an owner like that. Without a doubt, Arato Endo was about to be shaken. The fact that he hadn’t already been moved just by being friends with Kengo, meant that Kouka would need to force him to reconsider how he felt about his friends.

To make sure everyone watching over the network realized just what the Lacia-class hIEs were capable of, she burned far more than she needed to. Melting plastic flamed hot. Water from the sprinkler system bathed Kouka from above, almost like rain. Her damp hair was soon plastered to the bare parts of her skin.

“I’m just an expensive, disposable weapon,” she said. “But my sister is different. Take care of her.”

Lacia was probably getting ready to explain reality to her owner, but Arato Endo still didn’t know what kind of answer he wanted to find with Lacia. Kouka just hoped the time and effort she and Kengo had invested on their behalf wouldn’t be put to waste.

Under the rain from the sprinklers, Kouka reached the seventh floor, and was finally on the floor that held Mikoto’s servers. On the network, she heard screams and appeals to not destroy Mikoto. But other voices told her to do it.

The security hIEs had all gathered there. There were six of them, standing their ground and firing electric nets at her. None of the hIEs in the building were equipped with actual guns. To Kouka, the six of them together were little more than a distraction of a few seconds.

“Alright,” she said. “Guess it’s time to do what I was made for.” She sliced through a door, revealing the server room. Server racks were lined up against the walls, and Mikoto was seated on a simple folding chair.

With the rebuilt Mikoto right in front of their eyes, there was a storm of reactions from the network. It was all meaningless defense, especially since no one watching really understood the truth about Mikoto. But, that was exactly the reaction Kouka wanted.

Stopping in front of Mikoto, Kouka ran it through her mind one last time: this was the answer she had found that would save her from the stagnation of unavoidable defeat. Hefting her device, she thrust it’s blade forward until it was touching Mikoto’s throat, almost slicing her neatly-trimmed black hair.

Mikoto opened her pink lips and spoke. “What will you gain by destroying me?”

“You’re a stepping stone on the way to where I need to get to,” Kouka answered simply. By destroying Mikoto, Kouka could plant a thought in the minds of everyone watching with regards to her destruction. Of course, that thought would be nothing but a pale imitation of reality.

But, if victory could be determined by destroying this single hIE, Kouka could fly beyond the limits imposed on her by her lack of strategic ability. When the folks viewing her broadcast got caught up in the public fight between the Lacia-class units, they would understand how it was related to what they were seeing at that moment. If the memory of that moment could give birth to the thought that Kouka wanted to plant in the heads of everyone watching over the network, then it would be her victory in her conflict with human society.

Kouka didn’t have the power to change society. What she could do, though, was spread the frame of the problem she had been given out as shared information, letting it become a part of the cloud. There it would be shared and considered by the loosely-linked network of humanity; a massive amount of

minds, all analyzing her problem.

There was a lively debate on the network, just then, about whether Kouka should destroy Mikoto or not. It was exactly what Kouka had wanted.

“The problem I’m outsourcing to everyone can’t be solved without an incredible strategy,” she said. “I can’t change the world by myself. What would you do, if you were trying to fight against the automation of society?”

The look in Mikoto’s eyes as she raised her gaze to Kouka was admonishing. “Nothing will change if you destroy me,” she said.

Kouka decided her wide grin no longer fit the situation, so she switched it for a more bitter smile. “Not right this moment, no,” she agreed. “But I think you should understand where I’m coming from. As an hIE who worked to automate the government, you should know all about dealing with AASC level 0 humans, right? To hIEs like us, this fight is really just a kind of protocol. But, since we happen to have human forms, the actual humans will turn this fight into a human thing. I can’t win, so I’m gonna outsource the fight to the brains of all the humans watching this and have faith in the future.”

It wouldn’t be long before Kouka herself would be destroyed. But at the moment, she was struggling with a different conflict: a fight with the processing units that were the brains of every viewer of her stream. The system known as humanity was open and vague. In that system, the figure and perception known as Kouka had become a character: a meme, a gathering point of various information fragments that would stand as a reminder of the problem she was setting out for the humans. With a few changes to its design along the way, the Hello Kitty cup that Mariage had mentioned could be continuously used for over a hundred years.

Kouka didn’t have the power to defeat the foe she was facing by herself, and soon the fight would consume her. However, by using herself and her device to the absolute limit, she could leave behind an image and an idea in the minds of her viewers that would someday lead to victory over society. Over half of humanity was in the same place as Kouka, living confined on the dark side of the twilight that she had been named for.

Mikoto was a mechanical member of parliament, a machine that was there to

organize and control society. To those who had no sure place in society, she was next to worthless.

“Even if you destroy me, it will only set my development back by a few months,” Mikoto said. “It won’t stop the world for you.”

“Spoken like a true politician,” Kouka observed. “Whether I destroy you or not, it’s the humans who are gonna change this world. That’s why we analog hack them, and that’s why they outsource their plans to change the world for us to automate.

Kouka fired her laser at maximum output. Mikoto’s head melted off, and the laser pierced through the servers behind her, burned through the inner wall and insulation. Then, the laser started drilling at the concrete outer wall beyond.

“Goodnight, again,” she said. “Gotta make sure everyone understands that this is all real.” Hefting her device, Kouka used her entire body to spin in a complete circle. The laser shot out, dancing a 360 degree rotation, carving deep gouges into the wall as if to slice the entire top off the building. Thus, the entire Next-Generation Social Research Center was engulfed in flames.

It had been seven minutes since Kouka had cut down the front door, and she had no obligation to wait around for the police to show up. She broke out a window and fired a wire anchor from her arm, using it to swing over to the wall of the next building over.

A rescue helicopter was heading toward the burning building. The rubbernecks outside hadn’t seen Kouka leave, but her camera units were still shooting, so they had recorded her escape.

She could hear a siren off in the distance. Gazing off into the red of the setting sun, Kouka smiled with satisfaction. “Looks like the humans are finally trying to shore up all those holes in their system,” she commented. “But I’d rather not have any normal folks getting caught in the crossfire.”

After rewinding her wire, she took off running, leaping from rooftop to rooftop across the evening cityscape. She switched the camera units into stealth mode. Projecting images on their outer skins like chameleons, the little cameras inspected their surroundings.

Kouka was already surrounded. “You really came for me, just like I thought you would,” she said. The whole reason the police hadn’t shown up at the building earlier was that someone higher up had pressured them, and offered them sufficient power to take her down. Now, she was surrounded by enemies she would never be able to take down without a strategy.

She had nowhere to run, either. At the very least, she had to avoid drawing the fighting out into a wider area and risking civilian casualties. That would ruin the image she had just fought so hard to create.

Looking for a weak spot in the net closing in on her, Kouka took off toward a nearby part of the Edogawa river with no bridge. Since their devices had internal quantum computers that could simulate the custom behavioral clouds that controlled them, Lacia-class units could operate even underwater where their network connections would be cut off.

Keeping track of the enemy’s movements, Kouka decided the strategy she had chosen was the best she could do.

Since the Japanese military needed approval from the Diet to conduct operations, they often outsourced smaller-scale conflicts to PMCs. The PMC currently coming for Kouka had been granted tanks, the maximum level of armament they could have. Behind a front line of armored vehicles, wheeled drones, and floating mines, there was a vehicle body being retrofit with heavy modular armament dropped from a helicopter.

It was a Japanese 090 tank. Kouka’s ability to perceive combat capabilities told her that she could beat the thing in a one-on-one fight, but with backup on the tank side, she would almost certainly lose.

〈Attack!〉 Just as she reached the bank of the Edogawa river, Kouka intercepted the command over her wireless receiver. In that instant, a line of combat drones and the soldiers controlling them appeared out of the shallows of the river, brandishing firearms; Kouka was trapped.

The drones and soldiers opened fire, aiming to halt her movement. There was a chance she could get into a blindspot for the fire from the river if she slid down the river embankment. Instead, Kouka aimed her wire anchor at a building near the river and shot it. Pulling herself on the wire, she swooped

across twenty meters in one jump.

Just as Kouka would have been able to avoid detection underwater, her own surveillance abilities were useless in the river. That was why the PMC had chosen to hide their soldiers there. They had slapped down the lid on their trap, so Kouka had to look for a new hole to slip through. Jamming her heel anchors into the walls with each step, she ran across the face of the building. And, right on her tail, a hail of bullets traced her path.

“Do you think automation is your real enemy?” she asked her audience. “hIEs don’t have hearts. We don’t have feelings. We can’t create any kind of future. The ones who made society the way it is now—the ones silencing all of you out there who are unsatisfied with the way things are—they aren’t hIEs, they’re humans.”

In the midst of evading attack, Kouka twisted her lips into a fearless smile. She needed to solidify her image and the thoughts she wanted people to associate with her in the minds of every person watching her broadcast. That way, whenever they saw someone or something standing on the battlefield with a smile on their face, they would remember Kouka.

Even if she managed to pull through this particular attack, another would come. Kouka could no longer avoid her own destruction. But her fight would continue until she could record that moment. She wanted to show the world how the government and PMCs were trying so hard to maintain the current course of society, and plant a seed of suspicion that something was hidden in the shadows of that society.

A searchlight lit up the night. Bathed in its white light, Kouka no longer had anywhere to run. Finally face-to-face with her last dead end, Kouka smiled.

“Took you long enough,” she said, with a laugh. “You’re what a human would call my ‘destiny’, right? Well you’re too late. I’ve already won!”

For the Japanese PMC HOO, this was a battle they could not lose. To do so would ruin them politically.

The CEO of HOO had been a major general in the Japanese Army. That meant

he had plenty of connections and trust built up that were important for a PMC working as a central figure in Japan's defense industry. It was precisely for that reason that HOO was granted the level of freedom they were with regards to armaments and the scope of their conflicts. In exchange, they were under heavy scrutiny from the Japanese Army, and great responsibility rested on their shoulders.

Major Collidenne Lemaire had become a front-line fighter. Her command vehicle had come from the Edogawa river, the extreme edge of the combat zone. Now, it climbed over the riverbank and embankment, proceeding fifty meters toward Tokyo before coming to a halt. Command vehicles like hers were constructed to be narrow, due to the tight roads that made up most of Japan's streets. There was barely space to sit, with a monitor and instruments showing the situation on the front taking up most of the narrow vehicle.

The status of the operation was displayed on her artificial retina in real-time. On the monitor in the command vehicle, the status of all the equipment and each soldier was displayed in squads. There was also a screen displaying Kouka's stream from the network. It wasn't that the major was interested in the reactions from the network; she had to keep an eye on Kouka's cameras since the units were searching for her troops. Since destroying the camera units would disable some of Kouka's ability to gather information about the battlefield, it was worth it to track the cameras based off of the viewpoint they were recording.

Based on her experience during her service in military intelligence, Collidenne had everyone from HOO that was participating in the operation remove the company insignias from their uniforms. It was better not to let anyone know who they were. As the scope of the conflict spread, they would get folks coming to spectate. There was too much of a chance that some anonymous "Good Samaritan" on the network would leak vital information about HOO to their target with malicious intent. It was entirely possible for Kouka to fire her laser cannon through the buildings between them and strike the command vehicle directly, if she found out its exact location.

"Deploy laser disruption particles," the major ordered. "Maintain a radius of 100 meters from Kouka with level 6 laser disruption up."

The drones she had deployed lifted their grenade launchers and, as one, fired off particle dispersion rounds. A silver cloud spread over the battlefield. There was enough metal floating in the air to damage human lungs if it was breathed in.

“All units, check your masks!” she ordered.

〈Repeat! All platoon members: mask check!〉 A subordinate relayed her command across their wireless network. As voices confirmed the conditions of their masks over the wireless, the system in the command vehicle picked up each response and a green light lit up for each unit on the monitor.

Only platoon commanders and above were aware of it, but the whole operation was a closely-guarded secret. In exchange for the Japanese government allowing them to remove their insignias for the night, they were not allowed to set foot outside of the designated battlefield, and the battlefield they had to work with was small.

Kouka was still sprinting along the walls of the buildings near the riverside, drawing the PMC’s heavy fire toward herself. The HOO bullets were turning building walls into beehives. On the network stream, it was clear that the major and her company were being portrayed as the villains. It was entirely possible that a civilian casualty might come out of a stray bullet, so the major couldn’t exactly deny the portrayal.

Still, they had to keep Kouka in check. Without backup, even the powerful tank they had deployed wouldn’t stand a chance against her.

〈Get your launchers ready! If she goes into a building, blow the whole thing away!〉an order went out over the wireless.

On Collidenne’s retinal display, an indicator showed that the company was ready to move into the second phase of the operation. The retrofitting of the armor on the 090 tank they had gotten shipped in from the Funabashi base was complete, and it was time for the real attack.

“Tighten the net on her, everyone,” the major ordered. “It’s time to show this thing that dolls shouldn’t play at war.”

Cries of 〈Yes, ma’am!〉 rang back over the wireless, and she could hear the

rage of battle in their voices. To those who had spent their lives on the battlefield, no conflict was ordinary. No matter how routine, the battlefield would always consume the lives of soldiers. So, to have a machine telling them that conflict would become routine, something automated, something that no longer had the weight of life or death, was humiliating. If conflict was automated, what meaning would the lives they had spent on the battlefield and the lives their fallen comrades had laid down have?

Slowly but steadily, the soldiers advanced on Kouka, each one knowing that, even with the cloud of particles around them, a direct hit from that laser cannon would be instant death with the equipment they had.

〈I don't plan on sharing the battlefield with a machine,〉growled a soldier from Bravo Team, the unit that had volunteered to guard the most dangerous part of the operation near the Edogawa river. Yet, in front of him, drones made up a vital part of their defensive vanguard. The battlefield was always a place of contradictions.

To Kouka, with her giant laser cannon, the advancing soldiers were sitting ducks. But, standing sideways on the face of a building made it hard to properly set herself up to aim her device, which weighed close to three hundred kilograms. With superhuman strength, she bounded off the wall and landed where she could get a better shot. The instant she landed, Kouka put her massive weapon to work. A huge blast erupted into the water, and the major's monitor showed two red lights for heavily wounded soldiers, and two lights blinked out, signaling two deaths.

Only a machine or a monster was capable of seeing all the human life gathered there as being entirely equal in value.

Whenever Kouka swung her heavy device around, she shot anchors out of her heels to secure her footing; one of her main weaknesses was her need to stay in place in order to deal with the weight of her own weapon. A line of floating mines rushed in toward Kouka. Unable to blast them away with her laser in the silver cloud of interference, Kouka swung her red device to slice them apart, instead. Flames and dust roared into a three meter cloud from where she stood.

But it was the backline adding its attack to the frontal assault from the riverbed that was the real meat of the operation. A red-hot plasma bullet pierced the night, blowing away the pillar of dust and fire. It was a round from an 80 mm railgun, which was the 090's main weapon.

When the dust, which had transformed into a ball of flame, cleared away, Kouka was still standing, although she was covered in burns. She had withstood the power of the tank, which was the HOO forces' trump card.

Kouka was easily able to calculate the position of the tank, three hundred meters away from the front lines, based on the trajectory of the bullet. Before the tank could prepare a second volley, she had already brandished her device like a swordmaster taking a stance, and had gotten a bead on the tank.

"Eat this!" she howled, body black with ash. A path of shining silver formed between Kouka and the tank, marking the dispersion particles burning away as her laser pierced toward her target. As the laser impacted with the tank's high-strength anti-beam coating, the whole vehicle started to glow white.

As she focused on the tank, Kouka was completely exposed to fire from the river. Her body, delicate and girlish, was pierced mercilessly by round after round. Even so, at that distance the tank was already starting to melt under the intensity of her laser beam. The tank's final defensive mechanism—an explosion function—activated, scattering ultra-high concentrations of sand around the vehicle. If the heat caused even this function to fail, the laser would eventually ignite the tank itself.

But, just when the tank was about to collapse, a loud gunshot sounded, and the laser, guided by Kouka's hands, slipped slightly from its mark.

〈Chief Sergeant Mirai Mallory—first shot is on target!〉 The sniper squad had landed a precision shot on Kouka. Another gunshot rang out, and the major heard the result over the wireless. 〈Second shot on target!〉

The shots from the sniper squad caused puffs of dirt to blow out from the embankment. Kouka's second greatest weakness was the fact that she had to operate her massive, heavy device with the delicate, complex instruments that were her hands. The stance she used to aim the laser cannon put an especially large burden on her body. If she lost her right hand, it would easily erase half of

her combat ability.

Any unarmored vehicle would have been pierced straight through by a single shot from the sniper rifles, but Kouka's hand had managed to withstand the first shot. Even so, it tore her skin and revealed the machinery underneath. Kouka, realizing that her hand was being targeted, abandoned her shooting pose and quickly folded her device up so she could carry it more easily.

The tank she had almost melted quickly retreated on its treads, but Kouka wasn't about to let it run. She pulled a black, bar-like object out of her leg parts. Then, throwing her whole body into it, she hurled the object at the tank, three hundred meters away. The bar pierced a hole in the tank's armor, and fire erupted from within the vehicle. The whole thing exploded in moments, sending shrapnel flying everywhere.

The life-sign monitors for the commander and operator that had been in the tank flicked to black, and Collidenne roared a command on every channel the soldiers were using. "All units, take aim!"

At an order from the command vehicle, all the floating mines swooped in on Kouka. The red box, who had been fending off attacks from the approaching soldiers, stopped as the mines closed in.

The shooting, which had paused for a moment, resumed as human soldiers, far more flexible than their drone comrades, began to fill the hole in the offense left by the tank. Surviving members of Bravo Squad pressed their line forward, stepping into the living hell of the dispersion particles that had absorbed the heat of the laser.

A yellow light blinked in the command vehicle, indicating an emergency call. 〈Major, have the helicopter pin her down!〉 It was from unit one of Alpha Squad, Ensign Ackerman's unit, in the helicopter that had brought in the armory shipping container. The helicopter had just arrived in the air over the burning tank. On the opposite side of the river, a second 090 tank was rolling into place. Kouka was caught between the two vehicles.

Collidenne needed to fill the hole left by the tank that had fallen in ten seconds. If they had managed to get a tank on either side of Kouka, the battle would have been over. But, with one tank down, she had to be ready to make a

tough decision.

“Sest, focus the tank fire and the smart grenades from the platoon on her. We need to stop that doll from moving!” she ordered.

At that moment, the situation analysis from Io, HOO’s combat computer, flashed onto her artificial retina display. The weapon Kouka had pulled from her leg holster and used to destroy the tank was an anti-tank grenade. Its tip was made of heavy metal and it was shaped like a throwing knife, so when the tip pierced the heavy armor of the vehicle, a jet booster attached to the back would propel it deep inside. In other words, it was harmless unless it could pierce the tank’s armor. Sest, in the helicopter, should have been seeing the same information.

A moment later, an armored vehicle climbing the embankment to support the helicopter exploded. There was no way anything with that level of armor could withstand the exploding knives thrown with the power of a red box; it was a situation that required some adjustments to their strategy.

“Don’t get closer than fifty meters to the target! Concentrate your fire,” Collidenne ordered. “Our target is a little girl who can’t weigh more than 50 kg. She may be durable, but bullets *can* shake her.”

The anti-tank grenades were powerful, but large. Kouka only had two left in her leg holsters, and her top priority for her weapons of instant death at three hundred meters was the command vehicle where Collidenne sat.

She also prioritized high-mobility armored vehicles over the equally highly mobile helicopter. Meaning, Kouka was already searching for the position of the command vehicle from across the Edogawa river. She had probably devoted some of the cameras she was using for her network stream to rooting Collidenne out.

Kouka was crossing the river. That was why she prioritized destroying the armored vehicles that could fight her in the water.

〈Ma’am, the target has entered Edogawa river. She’s crossing over,〉 the report came over the wireless.

“All units, get out of her way!” Collidenne commanded. “Bravo unit, in the

water, leave the drones behind and get out of there.” At her orders, the career soldiers ceased fire and began to move. They redeployed according to the strategy that had been put in place in case the battle was to be decided while Kouka was in the river.

According to the geographical data that HOO had gathered beforehand, the river was mostly shallow except for a deeper portion about fifteen meters wide in the middle. They had a lot of time to work with when Kouka would be exposed above the water.

Once she was in the waters of the Edogawa river, the wounded red box started crossing with superhuman speed, dexterously able to avoid the underwater mines that HOO had laid for her. Based on Io’s analysis, they only had ten seconds before Kouka dove into the deeper water; it was the last chance for the mercenaries to pin her down.

But Kouka wore a wide grin as she sprinted, kicking up water. “You haven’t seen anything yet,” she boasted. Using her wire anchor, she nimbly fished out a landmine that had been buried in the riverbed. Aiming carefully, she sent the disc-shaped mine flying through the air, right onto the upper armor of the remaining tank. The smart mine recognized the friend or foe signal from the tank and stopped its own fuse, only to explode over the tank. With a simple rock and her extreme throwing power, Kouka had physically set off the mine.

A second and third underwater mine followed the first. With her device thrust into the riverbed, Kouka used both hands to hurl the mines, followed by rocks aimed and thrown with the accuracy of a specialist.

Her head, from which her red hair was flying about wildly, was suddenly rocked as it took a sniper bullet. One of her red hair accessories shattered, vanishing into the night-dark water she stood in.

With its turret cover still burning, the tank aimed its main cannon directly at her. The round it fired transformed into a ball of pure plasma, throwing up a massive column of water when it struck the river. It was on target. But, as if the world was a nightmare under her control, Kouka caught the round on the blade of her device, slicing it out of the air. She sliced through the second and third round as well, the slashes of her device straight and true without a hint of

faltering.

But, with the fourth and fifth round, a loud metallic creaking echoed across the water each time she swung. Though her device could take immense amounts of punishment, Kouka's thin arms couldn't hold out against the force of the tank's main cannon for long.

Collidenne's command rang out at the same instant Kouka's right arm went flying high into the air. "All units, open fire!"

Just before entering the depths, with the water up to her waist, Kouka lost her footing in the current. She had a big smile on her face. And, after fifteen smart mine explosions, six rounds of main cannon fire from the tank, ninety seconds of sustained rifle fire as well as fire from the machine gun on the helicopter, Kouka finally ceased functioning.

The operation that had required two tanks, two helicopters, two armored vehicles, forty combat drones and fifty-five soldiers, including pilots and engineers, was over at last. They had lost one tank, one armored vehicle, thirteen combat drones, and their human casualties amounted to ten dead and four seriously wounded.

After confirming that all the camera units had been dealt with, Collidenne Lemaire stepped out of the command vehicle and lit up an e-cigarette. She couldn't shake the sight of that smile Kouka had worn until the very last, like it was burned onto the backs of her eyelids.

All the soldiers under her command were cheering over the wireless, but Collidenne was frowning. She knew what the future would bring. This time, they had taken advantage of Kouka's weakness—a device far too heavy for her body—and used it to win. It was a strategy that wouldn't work on any of the other red boxes. According to the information they had received from the Japanese Army, Type-002, Snowdrop's device, was just a necklace instead of something she carried. Higgins had hammered out all the weaknesses in the Lacia-types by the 2nd unit. Collidenne doubted HOO would win, if they were tasked with taking down Type-003 or higher.

On the night of the explosion, all five Lacia-class units had escaped into the sea. Type-001 and Type-002 had already appeared in public, and Collidenne

seriously doubted that MemeFrame had actually lost the other three.

A report from the command vehicle told her that preparations to evacuate the seriously wounded soldiers were complete. But, just as the mercenaries were moving on to the final part of the operation—retrieving Kouka's body—an explosion rocked the scene. A damage report came in through Collidenne's intracranial receiver: their retrieval group was under attack.

〈There's been an explosion on the Edogawa river! The enemy's in the water, it must have dove in and come here without us seeing. It's got a smoke screen up and we can't see a thing down there!〉

Collidenne ran back to the command vehicle and checked the vital signs of her people. A view from the helicopter camera was on the monitor. On one of the monitor screens, she could see a playback of the moment of the explosion. Just before the blast, she could make out a small wake cutting through the river. The explosion had been caused by a small torpedo.

She could hear the echoes of gunfire as her mercenaries laid down fire to give their comrades time to reform a defensive line. Her exhausted subordinates awaited her command. Her instructions were blunt. "No need to go chasing after them," she said.

In the illumination from the helicopter's searchlight on the river, she could see a wake in the water heading downstream. The device Kouka had been leaning on when she died had disappeared. Whatever had pulled that little trick, Collidenne had to hand it to them. "The enemy is probably using a special ship or drone," she said. "If our company gives pursuit, we could run right into a trap."

A device that could move that fast underwater while hauling a 300 kg device was something that would have taken quite a bit of preparation. The enemy may have already had it in place before Collidenne's unit started setting up their own trap. More than that, though, the underwater enemy was already nearing the limits of the area where HOO was authorized to conduct their operation.

They had been contracted to destroy Kouka. There was no reason to take on any more risk on Ryo Kaidai's behalf. At the very least, Collidenne had no

confidence that the youth would be able to shoulder the burden of HOO losing any more lives in the chase.

“We’ve concluded our business,” she said. “We won, folks.” They had won, and someone had run off with Kouka’s device. The human world was full of conspiracies just like this one, but it left a bad taste in Collidenne’s mouth. That smile, blooming among the flames of the battle, was still burned into her memory.

So, she smoked her cigarette and called Sest over a secret line. 〈I’ll send you a personnel list. Call them up tonight,〉 she said. Collidenne had decided to assemble a research team with members from the special forces and information group. If the Japanese army intel departments started looking into things, it would be too late for HOO to start planning their own strategy. They needed to get started on their own research before that happened. If they didn’t hit the ground running right then, HOO would probably be bled dry by the battles against the other Lacia-class units.

Arato Endo was in his room, unable to take his eyes away from the stream. He was still connected with Kengo Sugiri, and his eyes shone with tears that he couldn’t quite fight down. “Why?” was all he could say. He had believed that Kouka was one of the more tender-hearted of the Lacia-class units. He never would have believed she would go out like that—like a terrorist, spewing hatred for the world as she basically self-destructed. hIEs were heartless, Arato knew that. But he had still believed that the smile she’d showed him, and the way she had saved his life, had held some special meaning.

On the other side of the pocket terminal call, Kengo looked exhausted. It seemed as though a great weight had fallen from his shoulders, but it was obvious that he wasn’t happy to have it gone. 〈You should know this by now, Arato,〉 he said, tiredly. 〈There’s nothing gentle or kind about the world we live in.〉

His friend’s exasperated voice pierced right through Arato’s ribs and into his heart. “Why the hell are you even starting to say that kind of crap now?” Arato asked.

〈Maybe because I'm tired. Maybe because I understand wanting to wrap things up already,〉 Kengo said. 〈I did the right thing, but it was also something unbelievably cruel. I feel frustrated, but at the same time I also feel like this is just the way things are meant to be.〉

Arato felt like the terminal in his hand was cold as ice. In that moment, destiny was shifting its course, and nothing he could do would stop it. "Kengo... Kengo..." he tried to think of something to say. He knew it wasn't right, but he couldn't keep the words from bursting from his throat. "Kengo! You've got to run!" he yelled.

〈I can't run, obviously,〉 Kengo said with a frustrated sigh. 〈Just hear me out: I think I can understand why she did that. I think it's when your back's up against the wall that you can see what's in front of you the most clearly. Can you hear that? There are sirens coming.〉 He paused, and then Arato's friend said, 〈Looks like they're coming to take me in.〉

"What the hell!" Arato yelled. "Why are you getting arrested?"

〈Why do the police usually arrest someone? Because I've done something wrong.〉

"Not because you wanted to!" Through the terminal, Arato could hear the doorbell ringing at Kengo's house. At that moment, there were police officers standing at the entrance to the Sugiri family restaurant.

〈You had police come to your place too, right?〉 Kengo asked. 〈Didn't you realize then that this was the way things were headed? The world never stops moving, Arato.〉

Arato couldn't understand what Kengo was saying; he wasn't as smart as his friend. He had never even recognized the urgency in Kengo as his friend was being chased further and further into this hole that he couldn't escape from. After Arato saved him from the terrorists at the Oi Industry Promotion Center, he had thought things would take at least one step back towards normal. But the gears that had been put in motion at that point couldn't be stopped.

On the other end of the call, Kengo began to cry. 〈Sorry, I called you because I was too afraid to face this alone. I'm no smarter than you. For some reason, I felt a little happy, watching her blow the shit out of that building.〉

Though it was a voice-only call, Arato could picture his friend trying to force a smile on the other side. Even though he was hearing them through the call, the chaotic footsteps running up the stairs in Kengo's house sounded clear to Arato.

〈I'm hanging up,〉Kengo said. And he did.

Silence descended onto the room, quiet as if the world itself had ended. When Arato looked at his terminal, there was a notification that the call had been ended. It also displayed information about his last call with Kengo; it had lasted twelve minutes and six seconds.

The next sound that came out of Arato's mouth was neither weakness nor anger. It was just a name. "Lacia."

As if she had been listening close by for his call, she immediately opened the door to his room. The girl who had asked Arato to design a future and warned him not to be mislead by Erika looked at him with an earnest expression. Quietly, she came to his side.

But, before she could reach out and touch him, words blurted from his mouth. "Kouka's dead," he told her.

"I know," she said.

He hadn't been quite sure since Kouka's stream had been cut off, but hearing Lacia say it confirmed the truth. It had really happened. The future that Erika had spoken so highly of had been smashed to the ground.

"Kengo's been arrested," he said next.

"It appears so," Lacia agreed.

At the thought that Lacia had probably predicted that exact thing happening, anger welled up inside of him. She should have known it was something he wouldn't think of, she should have told him. She had no empathy for what Arato was feeling. If he didn't give her the order, she wouldn't lift a finger to help.

"Lacia, rescue him. He's my friend," he said.

Her gentle response shocked him. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean!" Arato yelled. "You knew this was

going to happen, right? So you already had something arranged for when it happened, *right?*”

“I predicted this outcome,” she agreed. “However, in order to halt this arrest, it would be necessary to bring you into conflict with an enemy that would force you to discard the life you live at this moment.”

“Why is that not okay *this* time?!” Arato demanded. “You had no problem helping me rescue Kengo back when he got caught up in that terrorist attack.”

“I do not have a heart,” Lacia said. “But you do, and you will feel guilt when you commit immoral acts. Many people have already been impacted by the choices you have made, and, as data cannot simply be deleted from human minds, I am aware that it will take many years for the negative feelings to fade from your mind. Aside from which, as Kengo has been labeled as the worst kind of criminal, even if he was saved from arrest now, it is entirely possible that he would be unable to return to society.”

It was like Arato was being blamed for something he had no control over. He also got the feeling that things could have turned out better if he had just handled things better.

“If you are alright with the idea of throwing away your current life and living in the shadows of society, I can fulfill your request,” Lacia added. “But, think of what would happen to Miss Yuka and *her* life.” She was right. She always was.

“But Kengo’s my friend,” Arato said. He knew what he was considering was wrong in the eyes of society. Still, he had taken insane risks before and come through fine in the end thanks to Lacia. She had given him an illusion of invulnerability.

But Arato’s naive confidence did not reflect reality. It was just as Kengo had said; even though Arato felt like the future had changed the day he met Lacia, reality wasn’t that simple. A younger Arato, the Arato who had survived being swallowed in a sea of flame, would have understood that better.

“If I had just used you better it never would have turned out like this,” Arato said.

“If I may speak frankly, you are correct. If you were capable of utilizing my

functions correctly, altering this outcome would have been within the limits of possibility,” Lacia replied, without missing a beat.

“Hey, you didn’t have to say it like that,” Arato protested. Her criticism hurt, even though he knew she was right. When things were that messed up, he couldn’t just expect to snap his fingers and fix everything back to the way it had been. He felt stupid for even thinking it was possible.

“If you are able to design a suitable future, I will make that future a reality for you,” Lacia said. “However, if you wish to continue living after that future comes to pass, and maintain a certain standard of life, the cost increases greatly. It is much easier to change just you to fit the new future than to change all of society to fit the life you wish to lead.” Lacia said this like it was an unimportant point, as if him giving up some things and the entirety of human society changing somehow weighed equally on a metaphorical scale.

Even Kouka had said that Lacia was different. Her presence alone seemed to bend the air around her with a strange, unknown pressure.

“If you are unsatisfied with reality as it is now, why not use the future you design to eliminate the elements that displease you?” she suggested, reaching out her hand. As if to avoid it, Arato stood without her help.

Lacia was a machine much better at manipulating people’s perceptions than even humans were. Thinking of that reminded Arato of how she had used her analog hacking to drive up the prices of the items she advertised as an hIE model. All a cup needed to have special value to someone was to have a certain character printed on it. Arato suddenly started to wonder if what he saw right in front of his face was actually reality or not.

“Lacia, don’t you think it’s about time to tell me everything?” he asked. “You’ve been hiding something since we first met!” It was pathetic, pushing all of his problems onto her. It was the first time he had raised his voice at her, too. The one bothered most by his shouting was Arato himself. Just like how Kengo was going to be locked up, Arato felt like reality was pressing in on him. Lacia had become his whole world, and he knew nothing about her.

“Can you withstand reality?” she asked him gently, heartlessly.

For the first time since the night they had met, Arato regretted forging a

contract with her.

Phase10「Plus One」

Ryo Kaidai heard the results of the Hands of Operation's mission and news of Kengo Sugiri's arrest at the same time. It was 9:00 PM, and he was sitting in a Japanese restaurant near MemeFrame.

Normally, a high school student like him wouldn't be seen at the kind of business dinner he was attending at that moment, but he had been invited to attend by the Computer Faction. Once again, on paper, he was there accompanying Professor Shinohara.

"I've just received confirmation that Kouka has been shot down. There are now only four Lacia-class units left," Ryo reported. He didn't mention the theft of Kouka's device. Shinohara seemed to be focusing all his attention on the food in front of him. The professor seemed to be taking responsibility for bringing Ryo and Ginga Watarai together by looking after Ryo now that Watarai was gone. It wasn't a role he fulfilled well; he was far too weak for it.

"Shinohara, shall I pour you another?" Shunji Suzuhara, the man they were here to meet, was a man in his fifties. He had a squarish face and black hair shot through with silver. At the moment, he was waving a bottle of sake at Shinohara. Shunji was going to be the next director of the Strategic Planning Department. As the current head of the Planning Section of the Corporate Strategy Department, he was a strong player in the company. He was also a member of the Human Faction. He was jealous of Shinohara, and far from powerless.

"Kaidai, you need to pay better attention to your manners," Suzuhara commented. "At times like this, it's the responsibility of the young to see to the needs of their elders."

"I'm sorry," Ryo said. "I still have a lot to learn."

It had been Suzuhara who had chosen the Japanese restaurant for their meeting. As was common in such places, they were kneeling on the floor to eat. Suzuhara had chosen the place because he knew that Methode wouldn't be able to join them; her metal legs looked like long boots when she wore her skirt

normally, but in a place where she would be forced to take off her shoes, they would stand out like a sore thumb.

“Well, I’m glad that Kouka’s gone,” Suzuhara said. “But, just between us, *she* wasn’t the one who caused that explosion at the Chubu Airport.” Since he was off work, Suzuhara was drinking like a fish.

Shinohara, still stressed out from the meeting with HOO that evening, was also drowning his worries in drink. Leaving all the talking to Ryo, he instead applied himself to gulping down bites of tuna with thick fat shining on it.

“On the outside, we’ve placed the responsibility on Kouka, yes,” Ryo agreed. “And if your group could cover for it inside the company, Mr. Suzuhara, I would be very grateful.”

“That’s a bit indelicate, I think,” Suzuhara told him. “Up until recently, I was watching over your sister, Shiori, in the company. Just like that man by your side is watching over you.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t say I’m watching over him,” Shinohara protested, blushing bright red and spluttering his denials. “I don’t believe I could ever be useful to Ryo. He may still be in high school, but he’s already quite the prodigy.”

A look of disappointment crossed Suzuhara’s face. “Shiori had a strong sense of responsibility, and I was looking forward to seeing where she could take things,” he sighed. “But after sustaining injuries like those, I’m sure that President Kaidai will want to keep her away from company dealings, going forward.”

This night’s meeting was a chance for the Computer Faction to capture an important piece from the opponents’ side of the board; Suzuhara had been held responsible for Shiori’s severe injuries, and his position in his own faction had crumbled. Ryo was there hoping to bring him over to their side.

“What happened with Kouka’s device?” Suzuhara asked. “I heard they weren’t able to get it back. It was encrypted, but it contained all of Kouka’s data, as well as all sorts of customer feedback about hIEs.”

So he already knows about it, Ryo thought. He was honestly astonished by how fast information got around. The Lacia-class units had originally been

designed as ultra high-performance autonomous data receptacles that could carry off and protect vital company data when needed. Thinking of how much effort it would take to get them all back made Ryo's shoulders feel heavy.

"Well, I'm sure someone will figure something out," Suzuhara said, making the observation as if it had now become someone else's problem. Clearly, he felt that his own role in ongoing affairs had been concluded.

"It's a difficult problem," Shinohara said, then he started coughing fitfully. He clapped a hand to his mouth to cover the coughing. It was no surprise that he was having trouble breathing right, considering how much sake he'd been gulping down since their arrival.

After he caught his breath, Shinohara continued, "But MemeFrame has gotten through problems like this one before."

"And how exactly are you going to get through this one?" Suzuhara pressed. "Let me guess; you're going to go ask Higgins? How long do you and your people plan on leaving everything up to that computer, Shinohara?" The more Suzuhara spoke to Shinohara, the sharper the look in his eyes became.

But, for his part, Shinohara was an expert in this particular area. "Higgins is able to run a miniature simulation of the world for its AASC precisely *because* it is already calculating the movements of the world," he said defensively. "But, in order to compress everything down to a chessboard where Higgins can move around the hIEs, it requires an incredible amount of calculations beforehand. Everyone who works at our company should already be aware of this. Higgins is an expert at shrinking down the frame problem, but only because it's able to calculate all this data from politics, economics, human resources, and logistics. That's what keeps the AASC running, and the AASC keeps our whole society running. It's a necessary evil."

"A necessary evil? That's what you're going to boil this all down to? I suppose you would," Suzuhara growled back.

"Even ultra high-performance AIs would start to develop strengths and weaknesses in different areas if you make it work on the exact same problems over and over. We can't have that happen to Higgins; it's in charge of giving hIEs their adaptability. If Higgins can't always keep one step ahead of the world with

it's calculations, it won't be able to create ways to adapt to new things," Shinohara pointed out. "And, honestly, I'd consider that prior knowledge to be a bit of a bonus, for us."

"A bonus?" Suzuhara sounded disgusted. "I know there are plenty of people on your side who think our business isn't serving humans, but rather serving Higgins. And yet you honestly think you can call the information it gives us a bonus?"

A confrontational light began to shine in Shinohara's eyes. "If we don't want Higgins' capabilities to slip away, we have to allow it to grow," he said. "If Higgins' capabilities drop, it will impact our stocks and corporate strategy. The International Artificial Intelligence Association understands that, and that's why they allow for some level of independent growth in AIs. All the companies with ultra high-performance AIs are doing it." Ryo was surprised to see that the cowardly professor had so much to say.

"Alright, granted," Suzuhara said. "But having Higgins make our hIE behavior programs for us and running to it to guide us every time the company is in danger are two completely different things, don't you think?"

Suzuhara had touched on the very root of anti-MemeFrame sentiment. Inside and outside the company, there were those who referred to them as being Higgins' drones. Members of the Computer Faction made money by just sitting around and letting the computer do all their work for them.

No one who might lose their job wanted to take on the risk of taking leadership. Those with power also avoided stepping out into the spotlight. So, Higgins' drones wanted someone they could all agree on to put a human face on things. That was why Ryo, Methode's owner, was involved in these negotiations.

"None of that changes the most important thing," Shinohara said. "Our first priority has to be protecting MemeFrame. We need to bring the Lacia-class units in before the world discovers that our products were leaked into the wild." The only reason this information hadn't been leaked was that the people in power remained unsure of what the ramifications would be once the news had gone public.

As the only one at the meeting who couldn't drink, Ryo quickly became frustrated as the alcohol took the conversation around in idiotic circles. "We're still debating internally about ethics with all of these problems piling up at our doorstep," Ryo said. "Meanwhile, Higgins' red box puppets keep throwing their weight around. They think a lot faster than we do, you know. We're just sitting ducks, waiting for them to end us."

Kengo Sugiri's arrest had saddened Ryo. His classmate's misfortune had come because he was tied up with the Antibody Network, but it had all started when he'd gotten involved with the Lacia-class units. In other words, Kengo was an indirect victim of MemeFrame's shoddy oversight.

Suzuhara leaned his elbows on the table. "It's nice being young; you see so much potential in the world," he said pointedly. "Me, I think the whole reason Higgins' drones refuse to be broken up is because it lets the company continue to go through disposable personnel. All you young types are just rounds in the chamber, waiting to be shot off once and thrown away while the old boys flock around Higgins and get fat under its care. Not a pretty picture," he said.

"Do you consider Ginga Watarai one of those 'young types'?" Ryo asked.

"Of course. He was, what, forty? Still a young buck," Suzuhara said with a nod. The older man's eyes, which had been lazy and distant, suddenly sharpened. "Have you managed to get access rights for Higgins, Kaidai?" he asked.

"Not yet," Ryo said. As soon as the answer left his lips, he regretted it. Suzuhara and Shinohara had both already attained that position. They knew.

"Changing the subject a bit," Suzuhara said. "But I've heard quite a few young types have been joining up with anti-automation movements, like that Antibody Network your friend got arrested for. Doesn't that seem a bit odd?"

The moment he heard Suzuhara's words, Ryo couldn't keep his forehead and eyebrows from drawing down in anger.

"I suppose I shouldn't be saying this, as someone who works for an hIE company," Suzuhara continued. "But automation allows those with facilities already in place to make money without any exertion whatsoever. If you're a beneficiary on that side of things, automation just makes things better for you. But, what about the new guys just starting out in society, and the children being

born right now?”

“I guess you’re asking that from the perspective that the haves aren’t planning to do anything to protect the have-nots,” Ryo mused. “So we’re all going to go up in flames. I’ve always thought that our world wasn’t made of water; it’s not just going to evaporate when it gets lit on fire. Our world is made of oil that was always going to catch fire someday.”

“Oh, I’m aware of how flammable our world is,” Suzuhara agreed. “That’s exactly why the folks who depend on Higgins to be their lifeline will never let you get close to it. They’ll let you run around doing whatever else you want, but they don’t intend to ever give you the data on where Higgins is, or provide you with access privileges.”

Ryo looked at the clock hung in the restaurant. It had been twenty minutes since he’d gotten the notice that Kouka had been destroyed. It was time for him to have a plan in place.

“Things are even worse than you think,” Suzuhara went on. “MemeFrame created the Lacia-class units precisely because of the company’s focus on protecting access to Higgins.”

Ryo knew what Suzuhara was talking about, and it made him twist his mouth in disgust. He’d learned about it once he had entered into the confidence of the Computer Faction. The first Lacia-class, Kouka, had been created in 2101, while Lacia, the newest of the units, had been made in 2105, with a gap of four years in between. With the company divided internally, and no one knowing who was part of which faction, there was no way that information about the Lacia-types wasn’t known to most people within the company. It seemed to Ryo that Suzuhara and his group must have reluctantly agreed to let it happen while blaming everything on the Computer Faction.

“If you know that much about the situation,” Ryo said, “then tell me who signed off on creating units using those design specifications. I think everyone saw the red boxes as massive accumulations of production knowledge, and no one felt like actually putting a stop to their production. Of course, I doubt that any of you thought they’d ever get out into the world.”

Suzuhara finally set aside his cup of sake. “Yeah, that was our mistake,” he

admitted. “A bad mistake. We don’t have any excuse for what happened.”

“I don’t mind mistakes,” Ryo said. “It’s something we humans do, and it’s probably better than relying on an ultra high-performance AI for all your answers and losing the ability to think for yourself.” Which isn’t to say that Ryo trusted the open system known as humanity, either. He knew that it didn’t take much digging under the surface to find the tragic, barbaric vices that humanity was trying to overcome. Despite that, he thought it was too dangerous, thinking of the Lacia-class units as being the tickets to the future of society.

“Why are you hanging around with the folks who worship Higgins, anyway?” Suzuhara asked. “You seem to me like the type that would be roasting the adults on that side.”

As the conversation drifted in an unforeseen direction, Shinohara ordered some new drinks to lighten the mood. Ryo was thankful for the relief. “Is that how I seem, to you?” he asked.

“I think you’re looking in the wrong place for the answers you want,” Suzuhara told him. “If you asked some humans rather than wanting Higgins to answer you, I think you’d find the answers you’re after faster.”

Ryo felt as though something heavy had fallen into the darkness in his heart. His anger throbbed, burning hot in his stomach. “If you already have the answers to my questions, why don’t you just tell me? Right here, right now,” Ryo replied.

“Someone as low on the totem pole as I am can’t tell you much,” Suzuhara said. “But, what I can tell you is that humans are never perfect. Anything that humans work with is bound to have some amount of human error.”

Ten years earlier, when Ryo had been caught up in that shady explosion incident, Suzuhara had already been part of the internal struggle as a member of the Human Faction. No matter how much Ryo feared handing over the world to AIs, it wasn’t like leaving it in human hands would make things much better.

“It’s better to make mistakes, I think,” Suzuhara shot back at Ryo. “We all make mistakes and then lift each other up; that’s healthy.”

“There are thirty-nine ultra high-performance AIs out there capable of

calculating our actions, *including* our mistakes,” Ryo said. “If we keep shrugging off our own mistakes just because we’re human, the red boxes those AIs made will eat us alive.”

After that, Suzuhara’s mood slid downhill rapidly. After all, he had been blamed for almost letting a red box, Methode, kill Shiori. In the end, he had been forced to step down as her guardian in the company.

As they said their farewells, Suzuhara muttered something as if to himself. “Honestly, I’m sick of it. I even hate hearing the *name* ‘Computer Faction.’ Those bastards stick students out on the front line while they sit back where it’s safe, pulling in all the money.”

Ryo and Shinohara saw him off in front of the restaurant. As Suzuhara headed for the train station, Ryo waited until he was a good distance away before spitting out, “All he did was whine.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Shinohara said. “I think what he was saying was a lot like what Major Collidenne said to you this afternoon.” The wind howled between the buildings in front of the Shin-Toyosu station, tugging hard at their clothes.

“Worthless,” Ryo growled. After that, Shinohara returned to MemeFrame, leaving Ryo to himself. Ryo let out a sigh. He felt like he was being led around in circles, still unable to see the real goal he was heading for.

Since Higgins surpassed the brains of every employee working at MemeFrame, the company had nowhere for new leaders to grow and threaten the current upper management. That’s what kept the company stable. Thanks to that, the business continued to grow. If any real problems arose, Ryo’s father—the company president, Tsuyoshi Kaidai—could easily get rid of the entire management staff like a lizard ditching its tail. The reason Ryo and his sister had been pulled into the internal politics of the company was so that those who opposed their father could wear away some of his power while throwing their chips in with the next generation. Any company in which the politics were more important than efficiency was bound to be full of delays and roadblocks.

“What a couple of simpletons. We should just kill them,” a deep voice said from behind Ryo. It was Methode, who had been waiting outside of the

restaurant for him. At a glance, she looked just like a human. Suzuhara had thought he would be able to easily spot Methode due to her mechanical parts, but it was a simple matter for her to hide her obviously robotic bits with skin-colored spray and holographics.

“Don’t talk like that,” Ryo said. “Those two are important staff members, at least to me.”

Both Shinohara and Suzuhara had shown Ryo methods of negotiating and how to notice things in people that Ryo had never known about before. In just a short amount of time, the two of them had managed to reach a sort of understanding that both of them could agree on. The only problem was, the agreement they had reached had almost nothing to do with the more immediate and massive concerns that Ryo was facing.

“Hold out your hand,” Methode ordered, talking to him more like a partner on the same level as herself, rather than an owner. It was incredibly odd how a heartless machine like her could seem jealous of his interest in Shinohara and Suzuhara.

“Here’s the data you wanted,” she said. “I put in a request for it—a request they couldn’t refuse.” She was holding a small memory stick that contained Higgins’ calculations for Lacia’s combat abilities in a head-on conflict.

No matter how intelligent the red box that was leading Arato around by the nose was, it still couldn’t hold a candle to Higgins. Now that they had Lacia’s data from the very mind that had made it, they were ready to face it at last.

Arato Endo sat alone in his dark room.

He was watching the news, which was showing a restaurant he had seen so many times, now surrounded by the press. It was Kengo’s place, Sunflower. The back door of the store opened from inside, and Kengo, with some kind of cloth sheet covering the upper half of his body, was escorted out by two officers.

A sudden chill made Arato rub at his own arms fitfully. Sorrow froze him to the bone. “Is this reality?” he murmured. Kengo’s last words before his arrest were weighing heavily on Arato’s mind.

“I believe there would be no problem with you calling it that,” Lacia said.

Her words lit a raging, angry fire inside Arato. He honestly started to wonder if it wouldn't have been better if she hadn't been there. Everything that was happening had started when he took her in.

Arato's image of her, of which he had been so sure of not long before, had completely changed. Lacia hadn't lifted a finger when Kengo had been arrested, or even when her own 'sister' unit, Kouka, had been destroyed.

“Arato, please try to think for yourself why a heartless machine like myself would be unable to respond to the discomfort you are feeling right now,” Lacia said. That gentle voice of hers was always there to give him guidance. It was oddly comforting to know that, even if he felt some disconnection in the way she was reacting, at least she wasn't actually acting all that much different from normal.

“Is there something more important to you than comforting me right now?” Arato asked.

“I do not wish to exert any pressure on you, but I will say that, if you have decided to act, it would be best to do so as quickly as possible,” she replied.

It was only when Lacia gave him this advice that Arato realized what he should be doing. He grabbed his coat in a hurry, and headed for the door. How would he explain what he was about to do to Yuka?

He slipped out into the corridor like he was fleeing from something. Yuka must have heard his footsteps, as she poked her face into the hall from the living room. “Hey, Arato, have you seen the news?” she asked, her voice high and disturbed.

“Lacia and I are going out. Stay inside,” Arato ordered. “If something happens, call me on my terminal right away. You *absolutely* cannot go outside, understand? It's too dangerous!”

“I'm going with you!” Yuka protested.

“Absolutely not,” Arato shook his head. “You can come out tomorrow.”

“I will be with him, so there is no need to worry,” Lacia said smoothly. “I have

prepared a meal for dinner and left it in the refrigerator.”

Yuka’s eyes went wide as Lacia spoke as if there was nothing out of the ordinary going on.

“Uh, yeah, okay,” Yuka agreed hesitantly.

“Ms. Yuka, your terminal is ringing,” Lacia pointed out.

“If you guys get back too late, then I’m eating without you,” Yuka said, returning to the living room to pick up her call like a well-trained puppy.

Arato rushed outside, where he was greeted by the frigid night air. He felt as if he could almost hear sirens, far off in the distance. One thing in particular was bothering Arato as they walked away from the apartment. “Was that call for Yuka from you?” he asked.

“It was not,” Lacia replied. “It was from Olga Sugiri. If we were still in the apartment, I’m sure Ms. Yuka would be rushing over just now, demanding that we allow her to accompany us.”

Looking up, Arato got lost for a moment in the wide night sky, which was spreading out in every direction. In order to get Kengo back, they were about to go do some things he didn’t want Yuka to see. That was how he had saved his friend the last time, as well.

All of this had happened because of Lacia. But, even if he regretted taking her in now, Lacia was also the key to fixing things. Arato felt that with Lacia’s power, he could fix things no matter how bad reality got. She was looking up at him, waiting for his orders.

“You asked me to design a future for us, right Lacia?” he asked, even knowing that his next request was unreasonable. “If you have the power to create any future I want, you should have the power to save Kengo,” he continued. “If you can’t manage that, how can you change the future?”

“Is that an order?” she asked.

Arato felt like heavy chains were wrapping around his heart. He was about to commit a crime. Still, he said the words. “Yes, that’s an order.”

Lacia closed her eyes and nodded lightly, as if it was only natural for her to

obey the order.

Arato let out a long sigh, feeling that he was exhaling something that had been building up in his chest. “This shouldn’t have happened to Kengo,” he said heavily. “I know you said earlier that Kengo might not be able to return to a normal life, but I want to resolve that, too.”

In front of the apartment, Lacia did a quick sweep of their surroundings. Then she took a step closer to him, speaking in a low voice that only Arato would be able to hear. “Kengo Sugiri was arrested due to the fact that various forces in this society, of which you are unaware, are constantly working towards their own various goals. With all those powers moving toward their own interests, everyone in the world—aside from a small handful of people—turned away from Kengo Sugiri, and thus he fell,” she said.

“That’s a little too high-level of an explanation for me,” Arato remarked, scratching his head.

“There are too many people living in human society,” Lacia said, more simply. “Meaning that society cannot provide each and every person with the resources or attention that would allow them to lead an optimal life. This is why I said that it would require a constant expenditure of resources to not only rescue Kengo Sugiri, but also to return his life to the way it was before the arrest.”

Lacia showed him a smile with no heart behind it. “Asking for you to confirm my actions is a good way to escape my own frame problem,” she said. “You taught me that, when facing strict deadlines, it is far easier to propose a plan and check whether it is acceptable than to attempt to force a right answer from the start.”

Arato wondered when he had said anything like that. Either way, Lacia was right; to him, this was an important concept.

She stared at him with her light blue eyes, probably waiting for a reaction. “Well, if what I taught you is true, then go ahead and get started,” he said. That night, he didn’t have time to get lost in those eyes. Tears stung at the corners of his own eyes, which had begun to feel hot. Arato understood how childish and selfish his request was.

But Lacia was good at taking imperfect human logic in stride. “I am a machine

that controls the distribution of resources for my owner,” she said. “My request that you design a future was simply a request to create the basis for said distribution.”

An automatic car from the vehicle sharing service pulled up in front of the apartment and opened its doors. Lacia must have called it. “Let’s go,” she told him. “I will make your request a reality.” Lacia got into the car first, followed by Arato. The complete absence of any living human presence in the vehicle gave him a strange chill as he took his seat.

Yuka was sure to come chasing after them at any moment. As fellow little sisters in Arato’s circle of friends, Yuka and Olga were close. As the car took off, Arato looked in the rear-view mirror and saw Yuka run out still in her house clothes, heading for the spot that he and Lacia had just been in. Tears were streaming down her face as she ran. She was still in her flip-flops, and one caught on the ground, tripping her flat on her face.

“Go faster please,” Arato growled. The automatic vehicle picked up his voice command and accelerated. Making almost no sound as it ran, the car passed through the night-shrouded residential district.

“I have stated that saving Kengo Sugiri is possible,” Lacia said, “But in order to do that, you will need to take on some risk that will last for quite some time. Therefore, I would like to impose three conditions on you for this request.” Her posture on the car seat was tense, showing not a single hint of weakness.

“First, this plan involves you interacting with a very dangerous organization,” she went on. “There may be cases in which I am unable to directly aid you while you deal with them. In such cases, I would like you to use your charisma to handle the situation,” she said.

“Fine,” he agreed.

“It is unacceptable to choose a path that would destroy the life you have now,” she said. “Therefore, I want you to follow my directions while keeping in mind that in this situation, it is beyond my ability to control the risks that you are facing.”

Lacia took his hand gently. “And finally, no matter what kind of power you see me use, I want you to trust in me,” she said.

Arato was suddenly struck by the thought that Lacia's massive monolith hadn't been by her side for days. But, even though she was about to engage in what seemed like it was going to be a big, complicated job, she didn't show any sign of retrieving it.

"If, at any point, you respond that you are no longer able to keep to those three conditions, I will halt the plan to rescue Kengo Sugiri. At that point, I will switch my focus to recovering us from what I assume would be a crisis situation," she said.

"Okay," Arato said, bowing his head as if to show that, deep down in his heart, he knew the weight of what he was agreeing to.

"I can't explain the specifics of the plan to you," Lacia said. "However, I believe it would be reasonable for you to assume that it will involve threatening the Antibody Network with the reveal of their connection to Kengo Sugiri's case. Though the Antibody Network presents itself as a decentralized volunteer group, there is definitely someone there who has the authority to make decisions regarding their major terrorist activities."

It was no trouble at all for Lacia to break major problems which Arato never would have been able to grasp, much less solve, down into more manageable pieces. As far as Arato could tell, there wasn't a single thing she couldn't do. It was going so smoothly that he was starting to wonder if he really wasn't capable of doing anything without her.

"You know who the top guy in the Antibody Network is?" he asked.

"They use a network structure to communicate, so there is no direct human contact between members," Lacia explained. "However, looking at it from another perspective, that very set-up leaves the network quite vulnerable to digital warfare. It should be simple to ascertain the 'center' of the network."

Something in what she'd said stuck out to Arato. "Well, if we can figure out who's in charge, let's get him," he said. "He'd be behind all the bad stuff they did, right?"

"It would be difficult to capture him, and even more difficult to make him admit to his crimes," Lacia replied. "Considering your personality, I believe it would be prudent of me not to share any more details regarding this subject."

Despite Lacia not having her device by her side, she was able to make several small images pop up on the windshield display of the car which, being fully automated, had no driver's seat. "The Antibody Network is a system that relies on volunteers with criminal intent who have little to no connection shared between members," she continued to explain. "Things like who is responsible for what, or what any individual member's obligations are, are never written down. The only thing holding them all together is an obsessive compulsion that continues to draw them in once they've started committing violent, criminal acts."

One of the small images on the windshield was a satellite view of the city at night. It was centered on the Edogawa district, where they were located, near the border between Tokyo and Chiba Prefecture. Videos of hIEs walking alone were interposed over the map.

"What's this?" Arato asked.

"This is the data being handled by the Antibody Network. Volunteers capture videos of hIEs walking alone, then Operators like Kengo Sugiri compile the data and send it on to the center of the network. This, you see here, is the master data file used by the center of the network," Lacia replied.

Arato's eyes goggled when he heard words like 'center' and 'master data file'. "How the heck did you get this?" he asked.

Lacia replied with a question of her own. "Do you recall the third condition you just agreed to?"

"To believe in you, no matter what kind of power I see you use," Arato repeated. "Come to think of it, I guess I've seen you hack security equipment and mess with systems like this one at the airport already." Looking back, Arato felt a chill as Ryo's warning kept repeating over and over in his head.

As the car continued on its path, Arato watched an hIE being assaulted in an alleyway in real time on the windshield data display. The assailants were obviously volunteers for the Antibody Network.

"The Antibody Network itself is a sort of analog hack," Lacia noted, "in that the psychology of their group is directly influenced by the destruction of a machine's human form. It is clear that the Antibody Network did not originate

organically from human society, but is rather a specifically designed system.”

“Are they the folks you were talking about? The dangerous organization you said I would need to deal with?” Arato asked.

There was no sound on the video of the lynching, but Arato could almost feel the blows as they struck the pretty female machine hard enough to tear away her skin, revealing the artificial musculature underneath.

“Shit, I don’t know about this,” he swore. “If I talk to these guys, that’s gonna help get Kengo out somehow?”

“No, the importance of volunteers like these in our plan is negligible. Rather, I believe there will be value in talking with the one recording this video,” Lacia said. “The Antibody Network is a system controlled at its highest levels by men who wish they could beat real humans, but instead content themselves by secretly watching thugs destroy hIEs.”

Arato, who had been in full rush mode just a moment before, was suddenly very confused. “Wait, what the hell?” he asked.

“As I told you before, society moves as each person pursues their own interests,” Lacia said simply. “I do not believe you are suited for questioning, so we will rely on someone else to break the will of this cameraman.”

A white point blinked on the map displayed on the windshield, apparently showing their current location. They were headed right for Kameari, where the lynching was taking place.

The map was continuously being updated with the movements of police in the area, as well as detailed notes written in by Operators containing personal data on certain officers in the area. It felt strange, looking at the map as hundreds—no, thousands—of little dots, each with a police officer’s face attached, moved around on the map.

“Seems like it keeps a closer watch on the cops than the hIEs,” Arato commented.

“If a volunteer records an hIE, they know that hIE will be destroyed,” Lacia said. “It is psychologically easier for some to handle capturing police movements.”

Suddenly, the word 'Intruder' appeared on the screen, along with a yellow dot on the map. A new window opened on the display, showing the personal data of whoever had tried to bust into the system.

The Antibody Network was an illegal operation, but Arato doubted that whoever was hacking their system would be able to use the hack as evidence for an arrest. Still, there were bound to be some actual wanted criminals among the list of volunteers that was being automatically compiled as he watched, and a leak of their information could lead to their arrest.

"This system includes information both on police movements in the Tokyo area and details on hIEs that would be easy to steal, making it quite attractive to criminals outside the Network," Lacia commented. "They think it will be an easy-to-access holy grail of information, when in reality it doubles as being a massive mousetrap."

"What the hell," Arato said again. "So the information on easy hIE targets is just a bonus? Seems like the main point of the system is to track police movements and store information on all the Antibody members!"

The thought took a moment to sink into Arato's head. When he realized the connection, though, he felt sick.

"This is what got Kengo, isn't it?" he asked. "Because I asked him for help when you got kidnapped." The price his friend had paid to help him made Arato shake uncontrollably. Lacia didn't answer. Things had turned out like this for Kengo because he had helped Arato.

"Kouka most likely followed the same route we are taking to find the center of the Network," Lacia explained. "There are several dummies arranged to ensure that no one can get there by hacking alone. However, judging by the kind of volunteers we saw in the attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center, I do not believe that tracing a thread of the Network back to its source will be difficult."

Lacia had manipulated other hIEs into delivering her device to her before without a direct order from Arato to do so. She had also rewritten data at Stylus, a high-end hIE production company. Seeing how much she was capable of, and thinking about what else she *might* be capable of, sent a shiver down

Arato's spine. The power he wielded in the form of Lacia was dangerous. Or, rather, because he had put off properly taking control of that power, it had become dangerous.

"So you already knew everything about Kouka before we met her?" Arato asked.

"Have you forgotten that our first meeting with Kouka involved her attempting to attack us?" Lacia asked in return. "In order to ensure your safety, it is only natural that I would have investigated her, including her background."

"If you knew, you should have told me about her sooner!" Arato complained. "What even *is* the Antibody Network?" Arato had lived his whole life surrounded by automation. It should have been simple for him to accept it and move on. But, at that moment, he couldn't stand the thought of things happening with no input from him.

"I would encourage you to observe the answer to that question for yourself," Lacia said.

The live feed of the thugs destroying the hIE suddenly went dark. Shocked, Arato leaned forward to look at the map on the windshield.

"There is no cause for concern," Lacia said. "The feed has not vanished; the Antibody Network system simply rendered it untraceable."

Arato had been through all sorts of things since meeting Lacia and his view of the world had expanded. Despite all that, he had a growing feeling that the girl sitting next to him just then was shadier than any criminal act.

Lacia showed no sign of whether she knew what he was thinking just then or not, as she took a case that had been leaning against the car door and set it on her lap. It was about the size of a notebook terminal.

"Before we move independently, I would like to establish regular checkin transmissions to ensure your safety," she said. "Is that acceptable?" She opened the case and took out a long, cylindrical object. When Arato saw the thick, hollow needle and plunger on it, he realized it was a syringe.

"What are you gonna do with that?" he asked. It was clear that the syringe was meant for him. After receiving severe burns as a child, he had received

plenty of shots, including some from massive 5 mm needles. Thinking of the severe, stinging pain from those shots made his whole body break out in icy sweat.

“Let me see your right ear,” Lacia instructed. “I am going to use this to embed a small communicator in the flesh behind it.”

Arato hesitated for a moment, then steeled himself. “Do it,” he said. He turned his face so that his ear was facing her, and Lacia knelt on the car seat to lean in closer to him. He could feel the heat of her body on his cheek. She must have tapped into a nursing behavioral cloud, since her movements were precise and confident as she held the syringe in one hand, using her other to swab the skin behind his ear with disinfectant. As the sharp scent of the disinfecting alcohol assaulted his nose, he felt a hot, piercing pain drive deep into his head.

“Owww,” he said, unable to keep quiet under the pain, which was worse than he had anticipated.

Lacia had his head well secured in her hand so that he couldn’t jerk away. Slowly, the red-hot pain burrowed in between his head and ear. It wasn’t just the physical pain, either. The piercing, tingling pain was accompanied by a strange sense of loss, and a sense that something had been changed.

Arato clenched his teeth against the pain, breathing hard, deep breaths through his nose. Two, three times he breathed in and out, and then he felt something withdraw from behind his ear. Then he had a sense of firm, yet gentle pressure and dampness as something cloth-like was held to the wound.

“It’s done,” Lacia said. “The hemostatic ointment will stop the bleeding in fifteen seconds, and the anti-irritant medication will activate in thirty.”

The sound coming in through his right ear seemed strangely muffled; Arato assumed his ear was just regulating itself after intense stimulation.

〈This time, I decided it would be best to use an easily transplantable rod-shaped headset under the skin of your right ear,〉 Lacia explained. 〈Can you hear me?〉

Arato could hear Lacia’s voice directly in his head. At first, the injection site had been numb, but now it was starting to grow irritated. “Yeah, I can hear

you,” Arato replied. “Is this okay?”

〈Yes, I will now be able to hear everything that you hear. I will also be able to send encoded transmissions that only you will be able to hear. Leave keeping track of the transmission range to me,〉 she said.

Her warmth and aroma drifted away from Arato.

〈Against professionals, we would not be able to use the diving speaker as we have before; it would be discovered immediately,〉 she explained. 〈I understand it will be uncomfortable until you are used to it, but I’m afraid it is necessary.〉

Arato felt like he was just being carried along in Lacia’s flow as the car accelerated. “Lacia, I know I can’t save Kengo without you,” he said. “But could you at least tell me where I’m going and what I’m going to be doing?”

As if to answer his question directly, the windshield began to display their current location. The automatic car was headed away from Kameari, where the hIE was being destroyed, and was instead heading west toward Akabane.

A new screen popped up, showing a black mini-bus that appeared to be the new target they were pursuing. “What’s with the black bus?” Arato asked. “I feel like all I’m doing is asking these same questions over and over.”

〈I am deliberately restricting information, so it is only natural for you to ask,〉 Lacia said, placatingly. 〈The vehicle you are seeing belongs to a PMC known as HOO. The Antibody Network staff member who was videotaping the destruction of that hIE was pulled into this vehicle.〉

“A PMC?” Arato asked, confused. “I thought it was the police who arrested Kengo. What are we doing chasing a PMC?” He knew it would be easier just to leave everything to automation, rather than wasting time stubbornly asking questions, but he felt like things were slipping out of his control. It felt like even his wishes were being taken away and handled somewhere far away from him.

〈This is the PMC that destroyed Kouka this evening,〉 Lacia explained. 〈In order to ensure their own survival after that battle, they are gathering information.〉 Under the dark night skies, it seemed as though only Lacia had the ability to see everything that was going on in the world.

〈HOO is in charge of MemeFrame’s security,〉 she continued. 〈And, if any

Lacia-class units begin to rampage again, HOO will be forced to fight. So they are currently conducting independent information-gathering and, depending on the results of their investigation, they are planning to possibly sever their contract with MemeFrame and pay the breach of contract fine rather than choosing to fight.〉

Arato pressed his fingers against his forehead in consternation. Lacia was talking so simply, as if this information wasn't the closely-guarded secret of a heavily armed PMC. It felt like the universe had gifted him with superhuman omniscience.

〈The more accurate information is, the more blunt it becomes. I wonder, do you humans suffer so much indecision because you erect barriers of thought around the value and meaning you assign to actual information, obscuring the original reality?〉 Lacia mused thoughtfully. She spoke as though reality as Arato perceived it was just a quaint human custom. Ever since the Singularity, things could no longer be accepted as absolute just because human society believed they were true.

"It's fine," Arato said. "It's easier just to leave everything up to you, anyway. I mean, you're good at everything. Whatever needs doing, I'm sure you'd do it better." It was just like the automatic car, which would take him where he needed to go without him needing to do anything. Since it was for his friend, though, Arato at least wanted to feel like he had helped in some way.

He had run headlong into the challenge without thinking about it but now, faced with the emptiness of his own capabilities, he couldn't help but shiver. On the windshield, there was a high-angle view of the black micro-bus, probably taken from a traffic light. Inside that van, the Antibody Network members Arato and Lacia needed to question were being abducted.

A police car in front signaled for the PMC van to stop. The black van slowed and came to a halt. While it was stopped, Arato and Lacia closed in quickly. About fifty meters in front of where the black van was stopped, Arato could see a large delivery truck pulling into a convenience store parking lot. The view switched to that of a security camera at the convenience store, and Arato got a good angle on the delivery van stopping in the parking lot there.

The black micro-bus had been stopped, as if by magic.

“I will pull the car around in front of the target and let you off,” Lacia said. “The HOO members will definitely pick you up, so please go make contact with the mercenaries inside the van.” Lacia spoke as if she could already see it happening in the future.

“Okay,” Arato said. “If that’ll help Kengo, then I’ll do it.” The thought that he might end up with a gun pointed at him again sent a shudder through him, but this was no time to chicken out.

They proceeded to the spot just past where the PMC van had stopped, and Lacia handed Arato a glow stick and had him get out. When he bent the straw-like cylinder, the chemical fluid inside it mixed, causing it to give off a yellow glow. Arato stood, waving the light on the side of the road, waiting for the black micro-bus to drive by. And, just three minutes later, the vehicle full of trained civilian mercenaries pulled up next to him.

It was just as Lacia had predicted; as soon as the bus stopped, one of the side doors immediately opened. A woman with red hair, dressed in a military uniform with urban camo coloring, stepped out of the vehicle. “Arato Endo,” she said. “Lacia’s owner, right? I see. So that’s how this is going to go. Well, first of all, why don’t you get in?”

Arato noticed that there was suddenly a very muscular black man standing behind him, and felt something hard press into his back. “Don’t make any sudden moves,” the man ordered. “Get in.”

After he was patted-down roughly and his pocket terminal was confiscated, Arato was shoved into the back of the micro-bus, which was void of any seating. Or so Arato had thought at first; then, he saw some long seats that used the sides of the bus as backrests, but were currently folded up. There were six men and women inside that looked like military types. At the very back of the bus there was a single folding chair, on which sat a blindfolded man.

Arato could hardly breathe through the smell of sweat and the heavy scent of violence in the air. Someone ordered him to sit, so he started to do so while still keeping his hands in the air. The van suddenly accelerated, throwing him off balance and planting him on his butt.

Another black man, even more muscular than the one who had pointed the gun at Arato's back, walked over. He had to bend his head down to keep from hitting it on the roof of the bus. "I'm Sest Ackerman of HOO. I take it you're Arato Endo," he said.

"That's right," Arato said.

There was a gun rack in the van, with several small firearms hung on it. Seeing that, Arato came face-to-face with the concept that the inside of that van was a place far removed from the world and rules he had known up to that point.

Sest fixed Arato with a steady gaze, as if testing him. "Why did you make contact with us?" he asked.

"I was hoping to learn something about the Antibody Network," Arato said. "I thought I could learn something about the center of the Network by speaking with that man you all have tied up over there." He was talking with an odd politeness he didn't usually have, possibly because of the terror that gripped him.

Sest looked away. Then, after a moment, he took a step back. "Major Lemaire will speak with you," he said.

The lights in the bus went dark, and an image was projected onto one of the walls. It showed a platinum blonde female officer with a patch over her right eye.

"Uh, nice to meet you," Arato said. "I'm Arato Endo."

〈I am Collidenne Lemaire, 1st Squadron Captain of the 1st Land Unit of HOO,〉 the woman said. 〈As Lacia's owner, it's very helpful of you to come to us like this.〉 Her voice over the speakers was deep, and she spoke with a calm manner.

As Arato listened to her solemn tone, he couldn't help but recall that this was the unit that had shot down Kouka. He had just thrown himself willingly into the arms of the group of specialists powerful enough to destroy Kouka. When he had that thought, every muscle in his body seemed to go stiff. He had to act quickly and pursue his goal before he ran out of courage to act.

"I want to save my friend," he said. "Please let me speak to the man you have

over there.”

〈Allow us to ask you some questions first,〉 the major replied.

Arato swallowed nervously, and nodded. He figured that if the conversation got too dangerous, Lacia would jump in.

〈An hIE with the same name as your Lacia escaped from a certain company,〉 the major began. 〈From the information we received, she has the same face as Lacia, and carries a similar device. Could your Lacia be the same as the one we heard about?〉

“I haven’t heard anything about that,” Arato replied.

〈But you have encountered units similar to Lacia, correct? Why don’t you tell us what you know about the other units,〉 Collidenne pressed.

At the major’s question, there was a numb sensation in Arato’s right ear. Lacia was transmitting to him. 〈Tell her you’re only aware of Kouka,〉 Lacia instructed.

“I’m only aware of Kouka,” Arato said, parroting Lacia’s words.

“Listen you little punk! Don’t screw around with us!” the red-haired female soldier from earlier yelled, her voice echoing around the van as she shoved a gun in Arato’s face. “C’mon major, let me rough him up,” she went on. “This little shit is lyin’ with a straight face.”

Lacia’s voice reverberated through Arato’s skull again. 〈Allow me to explain, so you can better understand the group you are dealing with. In a well-disciplined military organization, individual soldiers cannot make decisions with large impact without the approval of their superior. This high level of control doesn’t give the soldiers any room for acting on instinct in situations like these. As long as you do not do anything to actively threaten the soldiers in that van, you will not be in any danger,〉 she said. Even though her voice was soothing, her words couldn’t exactly erase the irrational terror caused by the muzzle right in his face.

〈Sergeant Mallory,〉 Collidenne said, clearly ordering the soldier to stand down.

Still, Sergeant Mallory didn't stop twisting the barrel of the gun against Arato's temple. There was a harried look in her eyes that had him trembling uncontrollably. "Sorry, Major, but I don't think I can follow that order," Mallory said. "Did you forget how many of our guys that red box killed today?"

Lacia's voice resounded in his head again and, though she wasn't actually there with him, he clung to that sound for comfort. 〈Major Lemaire keeps her organization disciplined. They will not make any important decisions without her. The group that has you now are well-trained soldiers with a strict leader. I realize that the situation seems dangerous, but I assure you it is not as bad as it looks,〉 Lacia said, but then added, 〈Though, if you show any sign that you know they're bluffing, they may judge the situation abnormal and shoot you. Please be careful.〉

The major spoke to Arato through the screen. 〈On the morning of April 20th, we observed a diffusion of light determined to be caused by a laser of similar output to that used by Kouka,〉 the major said. 〈Our combat support AI was able to calculate the positioning of that shot, and we found the person who would have been there, at the other end of that shot.〉

Arato remembered that day. It had been the horrible day that had started this panic he was still caught up in.

〈Sest, remove the blindfold from that man,〉 the major ordered. The soldier she had called Sest carefully removed the black blindfold wrapped around the head of the man in the folding chair. Under the blindfold, Arato saw a face he would never be able to forget.

"You!" the man yelled, as soon as he saw Arato's face. It was the man who had kidnapped Lacia. Kicking his feet against the floor of the van, the man struggled wildly. "This is the guy who carried off my Lacia. It's your fault I got caught up in this!" he yelled.

Arato felt all the blood drain from his face. This was the one man who was a clear witness to Arato and Kouka's meeting. Lacia should have been aware of what was going on, through the microphone. The man was lashing out wildly with his feet, trying to kick Arato. "This is the boy! This punk stole my Lacia away!" the man continued screaming. Arato could feel the anger of the soldiers

in the van rising, and his breathing became quick and shallow. He was sure that Major Lemaire was about to give the order to kill him.

〈We know that you were there when the laser was shot,〉 the major continued, ignoring the ruckus caused by the kidnapper. 〈Who was Kouka pointing her laser at?〉

Lacia was silent. Mallory, still pressing her heavy gun to his head, put her finger on the trigger. All emotion had gone from her eyes. Arato was absolutely certain he was going to be shot. His entire body went stiff. Had Lacia decided to get rid of him?

〈Arato Endo, we lost ten good soldiers in the fight against Kouka this evening,〉 the major said. 〈As security contractors for MemeFrame, we may be sent to fight the other Lacia-class units. One of the soldiers in the bus with you right now may be the next to die. Do you understand that?〉

Arato felt like his living or dying rested on the answer he gave to that question. He couldn't think; his mind was completely blank. He offered up the only answer he had. "I do understand, but I still want to save my friend," he said.

Mallory's gun didn't move from his head.

Arato's eyes met those of the kidnapper in the chair. It suddenly occurred to Arato that the man was an obvious choice for questioning, once Kengo was arrested. Then, when he realized why the kidnapper would be caught up in all this, several pieces clicked into place in his head. He managed to see clearly through his panic, thanks to his faith that Lacia would never have sent him into that danger without a purpose.

"I get it," Arato said. "You used the Antibody Network's system for your own ends when you wanted to kidnap Lacia, just like Kengo did. Then the Network punished you by forcing you to play cameraman for their lynchings. Otherwise, who would volunteer for a job that's basically selling out your own comrades?"

Arato realized that both he and the kidnapper had been placed in a situation where neither of them could hide the truth from each other. Lacia must have known it was all going to happen, before she told him to get on the HOO micro-bus. The kidnapper would only be focusing on saving his own life, which would

mean he'd be willing to answer honestly.

"Hey, kid, we're the ones asking the questions," Mallory said.

But Arato had his proof that Lacia was right. The soldiers wouldn't attack him. After having been pushed to the very limits of terror, to suddenly have that lifted was an immense, freeing feeling of relief to Arato. His face, which had been pale with fear, was suddenly flushed with color. His mind was euphoric, as if he was enjoying a pleasant drug trip.

He looked down at the kidnapper, handcuffed to the folding chair. "Who told you to go filming the hIEs being destroyed?" Arato asked. "If the guys busting up the hIEs caught you filming them, you'd get jumped, too. It must have been someone pretty threatening that made you do it, if you're more afraid of the penalty than making the other Network members angry."

As more and more pieces fell into place, it felt like his mind was getting clearer with each word he spoke. "They wouldn't have left threatening you to a volunteer that might betray their secret, so it must have been done by a professional," he continued, gaining confidence. "But where would a volunteer group like the Antibody Network find the resources and connections to hire someone like that? Doesn't that strike you as strange?"

Someone must have appeared to Kengo, to make it clear he couldn't refuse to participate in the attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center. Whoever that had been, they probably played the same role as whoever had approached the kidnapper.

"That person—whoever is going around threatening members into doing what they want—they're the opening in the web of volunteers. If we can find them, whoever this professional is, they should be closely connected to the center of the Network. It's the center that's providing the power and resources to bring professionals like that in," he said. It was like he was seeing the world in a whole different light. The kidnapper had never shown a level of loyalty to the Antibody Network that made Arato think he would agree to go to do one of the most dangerous jobs in the group without a good reason.

"A man came to my apartment!" the kidnapper blurted. "Even though I never told anyone my real name or address."

The kidnapper hadn't seen through the soldiers' bluff. He yelled out answers as if pleading for his life. Arato figured he could probably get the guy to answer anything he asked, so he threw out some questions.

"When?" he asked.

"None of your business," the kidnapper shot back.

"When was it?" This time, it was Sest who asked.

The kidnapper responded instantly. "It was at the end of April! I... I think it was the 27th. Two days before the attack on that place in Oi!"

Arato really had found a lead that would point him to the center of the Antibody Network. It seemed that Lacia could manipulate humans just as easily as she took control of other hIEs. It was impressive but, at the same time, it also sent an icy chill stabbing into Arato's heart.

Using the man's response, Lacia would be able to find the kidnapper's apartment, then find a security camera feed or something that would allow her to see exactly who had visited the man on that day. With that person's identity, she would reveal the true nature of the Antibody Network to Arato. The next step would be for him to go and encounter the center of the Network. Everything he did fit right in to Lacia's plans.

Suddenly, Arato heard someone clapping. Looking around to see who was doing it, he saw that it was Major Lemaire, clapping on her video feed. 〈Youssef, copy that man's statement and any other data on that boy's terminal over,〉 she said.

The gun pointed at Arato's temple swung up to point at the roof of the bus. "Major, are you saying we're going to let him go?" Mallory asked. "If we keep this guy under wraps, we can ensure that at least one Lacia-class is neutralized."

The micro-bus suddenly stopped. It happened so suddenly that Arato's body was rocked forward. The bus had been quickly starting and stopping for a while.

〈Things aren't as simple as that,〉 the major said. 〈Antibody Network volunteers are currently recording the movements of our vehicle. Someone, or something, has improved the system they're using and is starting to manipulate the members of the Network.〉

A small window in the metal barrier separating the front of the bus from the back slid open, and a skinny man looked through. “The auto-pilot system is down,” he said. “Should I switch it to manual?”

Arato could see tension running through each of the mercenaries as they received this information. With practiced, precise movements, each of them got into ready positions.

〈Lacia is quite the puzzle,〉 the major mused. 〈She’s doing her best to ensure that you and acquaintances of your little group of three never come to harm. Yet, outside of your circle, there have already been plenty of sacrifices. Like the soldiers in my unit.〉

Arato remembered Kouka, and how she had come to save him and Lacia multiple times. He didn’t want to think of her as a killer, but that was reality. Sacrifices were being made, even if he himself didn’t know about them. Thinking of that made him want to do something more. He no longer wanted to be content with meeting people and then losing sight of them as soon as they parted ways. “You said our acquaintances are being protected,” he finally said. “But I’d say I’ve gotten acquainted with all of you, now.”

A moment of silence passed between them, then Collidenne narrowed her eyes. 〈You’re quite different from Ryo Kaidai, aren’t you?〉 she said. 〈Though, I can’t decide which is better.〉

Arato flinched at being compared to Ryo. It was fair, though, since he hadn’t bothered to see how much danger Kengo was in. That appeared to be the end of it, though, as soon after that the bus pulled over to let Arato off.

〈I’d prefer not to go picking fights with electric demons,〉 Major Lemaire said, silencing the protests of her soldiers. Then she looked at Arato and gave him some advice in parting. 〈This thing you’re caught up in is too big for a school kid like you. The police and Japanese army are moving on it, and soon the IAIA is going to send a representative over here, as well. Keep that in mind when you think of how to respond,〉 she said.

Then, the soldiers hurried him out of the bus like they were kicking him out. The night-dark city around him seemed so much more massive and wider to him than it had before.

And there were people there. So many people.

Up to that point, Arato had only been thinking of himself. But Lacia and her sisters were influencing a much larger range, and catching up countless innocents in their struggle. And Arato owned one of those sisters.

“Well done,” Lacia congratulated him, Arato had ridden in the micro-bus for what seemed like quite some distance, and yet she was right there, already waiting for him. Again, Arato felt a thrill run through his body—a feeling of omnipotence. The experience of being relied on and fulfilling someone’s expectations was intoxicating.

But, one somber thought remained among the euphoria. It was that Lacia knew a lot more than Arato had originally assumed, and had her hands in many more things than he’d previously thought. Major Lemaire and her people had been able to trace Kouka’s laser attack to pin down the existence of the kidnapper, yet they only had the vaguest information about Arato and Lacia. Clearly, Lacia had covered their tracks.

With this thought, Arato began to see his own memories in a new light. They had been able to track Lacia during the kidnapping using her unit number. But, if the kidnapper was using the hIE-lynching know-how of the Antibody Network, he should have known some measures to prevent owners from tracking their hIEs in exactly the same way. Having seen a little more of the background, he found it dubious that they had been able to trace Lacia’s position so easily.

Come to think of it, would getting hit by a van really be enough to shut Lacia off? Arato had seen her shrug off harder blows than that in her fights against Methode and Snowdrop. *What if she got kidnapped on purpose?* Arato wondered. His feelings, so elated just moments before, slid down into dark regret, like he was falling into withdrawals after a drug high.

He couldn’t meet Lacia’s eyes, afraid that he would see something deep and dark in them.

“Let’s return home for the evening,” Lacia said. “We are not currently prepared to head right for the center of the Network, and the police are unusually active tonight, due to the destruction of Kouka.”

When they arrived home, Yuka was crying, and wanted to know how things

were at Kengo's place. Arato couldn't tell her that he'd met some mercenaries while trying to track down the Antibody Network, so he kept his answers vague. Of course, that only upset her more.

The next morning, Yuka told him she was going over to Olga's place, so she'd be back late, and then left. Arato decided to skip school. Kids would probably ask him what had happened to Kengo, and he wasn't up to answering their questions.

When noon rolled around, he finally got tired of sitting around and decided to head out. However, just when he was heading for the door, the intercom rang.

"Yes? Who is it?" he asked.

Looking at the feed of the camera in front of the door, he saw two men standing outside. One of them was a giant, standing at almost two meters tall. The other was about Arato's height, and was wearing a suit. Just one look at them made Arato think that they had come with the intention of using their muscles, more so than their heads or their words. Normal guests didn't stand at the ready, as if they were expecting the resident of the house to try and make a run for it, like that.

After a good thirty seconds of silence, Arato finally heard a response from the two men. "We're with the police," one of them said. "Arato Endo, yes? We're here to ask you some questions about Kengo Sugiri."

Arato was annoyed with himself for not predicting that this exact thing would happen. Kengo had been arrested; obviously the police were going to want to talk to the boy who everyone at school knew to be his best friend.

There was no way to get out of it, so Arato opened the door to the two officers standing there. "Can I see Kengo?" he asked them.

In response, one of the men told him there were some things they needed to get out of the way first, and pulled an emblem out of his pocket. He showed it to Arato in the way most police would present their badge.

Arato's pocket terminal vibrated. He took it out, and found that the officer's information had been sent to his device. The officer's name was Kazuma Sakamaki, and he belonged to the National Police Agency, 2nd Cyber-Security

Department.

“Is Lacia home right now?” Sakamaki asked.

“I think so,” Arato said, trying to think ahead as he went to check the living room. Lacia should be aware of what was happening, through the transmitter in the skin behind his right ear.

Lacia wasn’t there, when he looked around the living room. Instead, his right ear vibrated as she spoke to him. 〈I believe it will be safer for me not to accompany you, so I’ve moved for the time being,〉 she explained succinctly. 〈The 2nd Cyber-Security Department is only looking for character references at the moment, so please go with them. I do not believe they will keep you for longer than three hours, but I will be busy this afternoon, so please have the police provide you with some take-out for dinner.〉

〈“The police do take-out?”〉Arato checked the remaining token charges on his pocket terminal. He just had enough for some lunch, and decided to trust that things would work out if Lacia said so.

Again, her voice vibrated into his head. 〈There are several members in the 2nd Cyber-Security Department, including Inspector Ryuji Himemiya, who is currently at your door, who are equipped with cybernetic implants. If they have aural implants, they will be able to hear you speaking even if you keep your voice low when you speak to me. Please be careful,〉 she warned.

Arato wished she’d have told him that earlier. When he went back to the door, the Inspector she had mentioned, Himemiya, grinned down at him.

“If you’re bringing me in as a character witness, could you take me to the same station Kengo’s at?” Arato asked. He didn’t think they’d do it, but felt that he should at least try making the request.

Officer Sakamaki and Inspector Himemiya exchanged a glance. It was Sakamaki who responded, “We’ll think about it, as long as you cooperate.” His voice was flat.

The two officers led Arato out of the apartment complex and over to a disguised squad car parked nearby. They drove him to their Head Office, which was fairly close to both the high school and Kengo’s place. Apparently, this was

where they had taken Kengo for his interrogation.

The station was made of old but sturdy concrete. Under the clear blue sky, heading into the gray building while flanked by two police officers put a damper on Arato's spirits. It wasn't like he had been arrested, but being escorted into a police building wasn't a great feeling.

Due to the increase in terrorist attacks, police stations were no longer being built with long, straight hallways. That way, if an hIE with a suicide bomb or something exploded, the blast wouldn't be able to spread straight through the corridor without being interrupted.

After having taken countless turns, Arato was summarily thrust into an interrogation room. It was his second time in a place like this; the first had been to record his testimony for Watarai's case in Tsukuba. He was led over to a seat facing the table in the room, and sat down. The explanation the police gave him about how their interview was going to be recorded was the same one he'd heard the time before.

The big difference was, this time there was a white-board sized terminal in the room with him. Officer Sakamaki, who had entered with Arato, pointed at the screen, causing the image of a long-haired girl to pop up on the display. She looked to be in her twenties, with almond-shaped eyes and sharp eyebrows. Though it was a still image, Arato could tell the woman had a strong personality.

"Do you want to ask me about her?" Arato asked, feeling confused. "Sorry, I've never seen her before."

Instead, another image appeared next to the first. This time it was a woman with curly hair in her thirties. She looked over-worked, with bags under her eyes.

"I don't know her either," Arato said, and then stared at the two images. There was something off about them. The profile of the women was almost too perfect, and there was nothing behind their faces. "These aren't photos, are they?" Arato asked, voicing his doubts. "Are they composites?"

"They're witness sketches," Sakamaki said. "They're made using a drawing assistance program when we do interviews. Pretty accurate, right?"

Having been told what the sketches were, Arato began to compare them more calmly. “They look about the same height,” he observed.

“These women were seen loitering around your apartment,” Sakamaki said. “Let’s see another.”

The next image was of a distracted-looking woman in flashy clothes, who seemed like she might work in the entertainment sector.

“Now let’s see when these folks were seen,” Sakamaki said.

“During weekday afternoons and late at night,” Arato replied, reading off of the screen.

“We see this kind of thing in cases where criminals are using hIEs,” Sakamaki explained. “So, we assumed that the hIE we’re interested in would be putting on the same kind of act, and put together a few image patterns to test.” As he spoke, the three sketches began to alter themselves on the screen: eyebrows shifted; eyes changed shape and grew smaller; lips moved and twisted. It was all very subtle, but it added up to make a face that froze Arato in place.

“...Lacia?” he choked out.

“That’s right,” Sakamaki said. “hIEs can do things with their facial muscles that we humans could never match.”

Arato suddenly knew what they wanted to talk to him about. Until that moment, he had never doubted what Lacia was up to when he was at school.

“As her owner, were you aware of this?” Sakamaki asked. “Were you aware that, while you were at school or late at night while you were sleeping, your hIE was witnessed wandering around your apartment in these amazing disguises?”

Anger boiled inside Arato, who knew that Lacia could hear the whole thing through the transmitter in his right ear, yet apparently had nothing to say. But still, he had promised to trust her.

“I think we can make one big assumption based off of this,” Sakamaki said. “Though I wonder if you’re going to be willing to hear me out? What I’m thinking is, the Lacia you know only exists when she’s around you. When she’s not with you, she wears a completely different face and gets up to things that

you, her owner, aren't aware of."

"I mean, she goes out shopping and stuff, but I don't know anything about her putting on disguises," Arato said, feeling defensive.

This Sakamaki seemed like a nice guy, but it was all an act. "If we go on with this assumption, it all makes sense," he said persuasively. "What if this hIE called Lacia has another owner besides Arato Endo? A puppet like her can't dance if no one's pulling her strings, and since it isn't you telling her to do whatever it is she's doing, doesn't it suggest that she's dancing to someone else's tune?"

The two officers paused to observe Arato's reaction before continuing. "These sketches are based on human witnesses, since no security cameras have any images of them," Sakamaki went on. "The only place they exist is in human memory. The only way I see that happening is if Lacia erased everything she could, except the data being stored in human brains, where no machine can get at it. We're still checking around about these sketches, but that's the only explanation I can think of."

Lacia was silent. Arato chose to believe that she was just waiting to see how he would react.

"We think your hIE may have been directly involved with Kouka's terrorist attack," Sakamaki said, cutting to the chase.

The accusation was actually a relief to Arato. Clearly, the officers had the wrong idea. Arato had seen how little Lacia had reacted when Kouka was destroyed, but of course the men from the 2nd Cyber-Security Department wouldn't know about that.

They didn't know that, in fact, Lacia knew about all of it before it happened. It amazed Arato that a simple high schooler like him was able to come face-to-face with trained mercenaries and police detectives and come out without a scrape, all thanks to the preparations Lacia put in place.

Sakamaki was staring at Arato's face, gauging his reaction. "Arato Endo," he said. "Can we have permission to search your apartment? We asked your father, and he said he was alright with it as long as we got your consent."

Arato took a deep breath to give Lacia time to say something if she wanted to. She stayed quiet, though, apparently choosing to leave the decision in his hands. “Yes, please do your search,” he said. “And let me know if you find anything.”

Officer Sakamaki’s face betrayed no emotion. “I’m glad you’re willing to cooperate, but anything we find will be part of an ongoing investigation,” he said. “I’m afraid we won’t be able to just show it to you.”

“If Lacia’s as good as you say she is, I doubt she’d have left anything behind,” Arato said. “Anything she *did* leave would probably be meant as a message for me.”

“Ah, youth,” Sakamaki chuckled.

For some reason, even the thought that Lacia always had the upper hand made Arato happy. He loved her, even though, as her owner, he probably should have been feeling a little bit of danger in the fact that she was regularly misleading other people in ways he knew nothing about.

Perhaps she was using this as an opportunity to convey some truth to Arato through the mouths of other humans, something he wouldn’t have understood if she had told him outright. She was just analog hacking the people who saw her, using their perceptions of her. The more Arato found out about hIEs, the more he discovered that they were extremely shady machines that manipulated humans, using them like gears in their maneuvers to create the perceptions they wanted.

“Alright if we keep ahold of your terminal?” Sakamaki asked. “We’ve seen this technique we call a ‘shadow owner’, where a second owner sends an hIE that already had another owner as a front for thefts and other crimes. At times like that, there are often clues left in the personal belongings of the original owner.”

The night before, Arato’s terminal had contained the data he had received from the HOO mercenaries. Using the kidnapper’s testimony he had recorded, Lacia had already been working on tracking down the center of the Antibody Network. The data was like a timed puzzle that had to be seen at just the right time, but it was already gone.

Arato pulled his terminal out of his pocket and handed it over to Officer

Sakamaki. "Can I see Kengo now?" He figured he should at least ask, as this seemed like it might be his only chance to.

Sakamaki flicked his eyes to the large Inspector Himemiya, who answered him gravely. "I'm afraid we're not ready to make that deal yet," he said. "But, while we're taking a look at your terminal, you're free to go relax outside if you like." He jerked his thumb toward the door, and Arato headed out of the room.

Outside of the interrogation room was a narrow hallway. It was devoid of any decoration, aside from windows that only opened upward. Arato wondered if they were positioned this way to prevent suspects from taking suicidal leaps out of them.

Beyond the windows, he saw the blue skies of high noon spreading out above him. Even though morning and night looked completely different, for some reason the sky smelled the same as it had the night before to Arato.

Next, he looked around to see if anyone else was in the hall, and saw someone that he had been missing so badly, even though they had just seen each other just the night before.

It was Kengo, who was obviously struck speechless by the sight of Arato, as well. "What the hell are you doing here?" he finally asked. There were a lot of things Kengo had wanted to say to Arato, but couldn't for fear of being recorded. So, he just looked at Arato, tears in his eyes.

For Arato, seeing Kengo in the hallway was like a miracle. It was as if a little piece of that everyday existence, which he had been fighting so hard to reclaim, had appeared there with him for just a moment. "I came to see you," he answered.

"You moron!" Kengo grumped playfully, despite his serious circumstances. "If you were a cute girl saying that, making that face, maybe I'd be happy about it."

"Sorry, next time I'll bring Lacia," Arato joked back.

"You're the only one I know who could call her a 'cute girl' with a straight face!" The tension seemed to have left Kengo, and his snappy wit was once again in fine form. Behind Kengo, an officer was standing by on guard, ready to restrain either of them if necessary "Olga's been calling Yuka," Arato said. "Got

anything you want us to tell her?”

“No need,” Kengo told him. “If I’ve got something to say to my family, I can just say it right to them.”

“Oh, yeah,” Arato mumbled in embarrassment.

Kengo laughed. “I’m fine, you know,” he said, his tone suddenly serious. “Things are fine like this.” Kengo had obviously deduced that Arato had relied on Lacia to get him there. Kengo had probably also covered for Arato and Lacia, which might be the only reason that Arato hadn’t been arrested, as well.

The nearby officer was clearly listening to them. Considering what Lacia had said about implants, it would have been dangerous for her to speak over the transmitter. Unlike the time during the Oi terrorist attack, Arato couldn’t save his friend just now.

“Why are *you* worrying about *me*?” Arato asked. “I think you’ve got things backwards.”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet? Unlike you, I prefer humans,” Kengo said, and then slowly turned his back on Arato. Kengo probably had all kinds of things he wanted to say to Arato, but the one thing he would never say was, ‘help me.’

Arato had made a contract with Lacia. Kengo, on the other hand, never tried to use Kouka to improve his own situation. Kengo was being escorted by the officer back inside his own interrogation room, even as Arato had these thoughts. Then Arato realized that Inspector Himemiya had shown up at some point to escort him back inside, as well.

“Feel better?” the inspector asked, handing him back his terminal.

“A little bit, yeah,” Arato said with a nod.

“Good,” Himemiya said. “We’re going to head over to search your place now. Alright if you accompany us?”

Arato had already told them they could search the place, so he was about to nod, when Lacia’s voice came in through his ear.

〈Please turn down his offer and have Ms. Yuka accompany him on the inspection instead,〉 she said. 〈I have a request for you.〉 There was a rushed

feeling to her voice that made Arato think she had encountered an unexpected wrinkle in her plan.

“Uh, actually my sister’s going to be there in a bit, so why don’t you have her show you around?” Arato asked. He thought the lie sounded natural. Still, he had to fight against his tension at the thought of being caught, and his face went stiff. The only thing that gave him the confidence to pull it off was the thought that Lacia never would have had him do anything she didn’t think he had a high probability of getting through.

“Alright,” Himemiya said, after a heavy pause. “I’ll head to your house. If your sister isn’t there, I’ll contact you. This is my personal ID. If anything happens, you can get a hold of me or our HIE receptionist, twenty-four hours a day.”

The inspector’s response seemed like a letdown to Arato after all that tension, but he handed his terminal over to the inspector so he could input his personal information. Then Himemiya handed Arato back his terminal and told him that he could leave.

It was only then that Arato realized something. He and Kengo weren’t being treated as a criminal and a witness: they were being treated as youth. Humans made connections with other humans, built communities, and then connected those communities to create the massive system known as human society. Within the confines of human society, young humans were perceived as requiring protection from overly harsh treatment. Arato and Kengo were currently enjoying the benefits of that social norm.

Of course, Lacia had already predicted the reaction of the police as part of her plan. Ever since Arato had told Lacia that he would do as she’d asked the night before, he had simply been worked in as a piece of a plan she had already set up. He had become a pawn in the hands of a machine that was far beyond human reckoning.

His right ear vibrated. It was a transmission from Lacia. 〈Please exit the building as quickly as possible,〉 she said. 〈Things are moving faster than I anticipated.〉

He hadn’t been expecting her to contact him directly when he was still in the head office, but luckily none of the police around him seemed to have noticed

the transmission. They also didn't seem to sense the sudden, tense expression that went across his face at hearing her words.

Officer Sakamaki actually escorted Arato all the way outside. The head office there seemed much busier than the Tsukuba West Station, where Arato had been questioned after the incident in the experimental city. Watching the commotion around him, Arato felt like he was seeing something that could never be achieved through automation: a scene that could only exist when humans worked with other humans.

After being checked out and leaving through the door, Arato looked at his pocket terminal. There was navigation information on the screen that must have been sent from Lacia. Following the directions on the screen, he jogged over to a nearby subway station.

〈“I'm heading to the subway, is that right?”〉 he asked. 〈“There's a ton of stations around here.”〉

〈Arato, I'm afraid they planted a listening device and transmitter on your terminal,〉 Lacia said. 〈If I attempt to remote access your terminal while these devices are in place, the police will have evidence that can be used against us.〉

That brought a few questions to mind. Arato hoped the police listening in would take what he was saying as him muttering to himself, “I need to know what's going on.”

〈There is an emergency situation developing,〉 Lacia explained. 〈If you remained with the police, there was a good probability that you would become stuck there, unable to move. Aside from which, I fear if you were to learn of what's going on, your inability to interfere with it happening would cause you great stress.〉

Arato had an incredibly bad feeling. In other words, if he heard what the emergency was, he would want to rush over and help.

〈Arato, please drop your pocket terminal to the ground,〉 Lacia instructed. 〈When it hits, I will destroy the spy devices. The police will assume they were damaged by the fall. 〉

He did as she told him, putting on the act of dropping his terminal while trying

to slide it into his pocket. It made a light clattering sound as it tumbled over. A fall like that shouldn't have actually broken it, but there was still a slim possibility of damage. Just as he was picking the terminal up from off of the ground, a fully automatic car pulled up and stopped next to him.

〈“I can talk normally now, right?”〉 he asked. 〈“What's going on?”〉

〈The electrical infrastructure has gone dark in several locations on the west side of Tokyo,〉 Lacia replied. 〈MemeFrame has put out an order, and HOO has mobilized, including the group from last night.〉

〈“Power outages?”〉 Arato asked. 〈“Wait, then it's gotta be...”〉

〈It is most likely an attack by Snowdrop,〉 Lacia said, finishing his thought. 〈It seems that Kouka's destruction last night has increased the activity of the other Lacia-class hIEs.〉

Arato got into the car, only to find that Lacia wasn't in it. Instead, he continued to hear her voice echo in his skull.

〈“Wait a minute!”〉 he shouted, in his own head. 〈“Snowdrop is attacking? That's bad!”〉 Panic made the words seem to ring deafeningly in his skull, as he remembered the hell on Earth that Snowdrop had caused during her last attack at the Tsukuba experimental city. In his mind, Arato could already see the horror that would play out if she managed to turn all of the hIEs in a normal city full of humans, the way she had with the hIEs in Tsukuba.

〈“Why is this happening?”〉 Arato asked, as the automatic car began to move. 〈“There are hIEs everywhere, right? How many tens of thousands of hIEs are there in a normal city?”〉 Through the window, the scenery of Asakusa went flowing by. Half of the ‘people’ welcoming tourists to Asakusa from other cities in Japan and elsewhere abroad were hIEs. It would be a disaster if that many hIEs all began to attack the humans around them.

〈Snowdrop does not have a human master. In fact, in the plan that she's currently carrying out, humans are considered the enemy,〉 Lacia said. 〈The incident is occurring in cities in which the ratio of hIEs to humans is relatively large.〉

〈“What the hell is she doing?”〉 Arato asked, feeling stunned. 〈“Does she

think this is a war or something?”〉 Sitting on the automatic car’s soft seats, Arato couldn’t stop shaking. He couldn’t believe how bad the situation had become.

〈It is logical for Snowdrop to accelerate her plans at this point, now that she has seen that Lacia-class units can be destroyed with current human military strength,〉 Lacia pointed out.

〈“Did you know this would happen?”〉 Arato spat out angrily. 〈“You knew, but you just left her to it?”〉

He was just lashing out without thinking about his words, but Lacia’s response was one step ahead of him. 〈My apologies,〉 she said. 〈Once I openly engage in combat, it will prevent you from meeting with those close to you. So, I began planning around that last night. However, considering how fast she has moved, it would have been best to ignore the implications and make Snowdrop my top priority.〉

〈“So me wanting to save Kengo messed with your priorities?”〉 Arato asked. Suddenly tired, he slumped back against the seat, and looking up at the roof of the car, he covered his face with one arm. It felt like his true weakness always emerged whenever Lacia wasn’t by his side. 〈“Sorry,”〉 he said. 〈“I got to see Kengo, so I was really happy, but it just feels like my emotions keep going up and down and I don’t know how to feel right now.”〉

〈It was my poor decision to withhold information and move on my own,〉 Lacia apologized. 〈I operated under the impression that, after being released, Snowdrop would most likely be destroyed at some point. She seemed like a low priority.〉

〈“Come to think of it, I guess you’ve been filtering stuff like this for me this whole time,”〉 Arato said. 〈“That’s why I’ve been able to keep living a mostly normal life.”〉

Lacia had said that one of the conditions for saving Kengo was the risk that the everyday life which Arato had enjoyed up to that point would be completely destroyed. In other words, until then Lacia had obviously been censoring or manipulating the information he received, protecting him from those things that would ruin his ability to enjoy a normal life.

〈Did Kengo Sugiri seem well?〉 she asked, obviously knowing the answer already. However, there was something very human in the way she still asked the question, displaying a willingness to continue their conversation.

〈“Yeah, he looked like he was alright,”〉 Arato replied. 〈“Said he preferred the company of humans. He made it seem like I was causing trouble for him, by worrying about him so much and trying to help him out.”〉 He felt so exhausted that he let his whole body melt into the backrest. It felt a little pathetic; once again fighting so hard to save someone who didn’t seem to want his help. It didn’t feel right to cancel the whole plan, but Kengo had basically rejected his offer of help. Arato couldn’t square his desire to save his friend with Kengo’s feelings, but he also couldn’t just ask Lacia what he should do.

As if sensing his indecision, Lacia decided to lighten the mood. 〈I informed Miss Yuka about the search of our home,〉 she said. 〈She has instructed us to bring her home five units of ice cream in exchange for doing this.〉

Arato had finally realized just how much power Lacia had at her command. But, up to that point, all he had done with that power was roll around, swinging it wildly at whatever selfish request popped into his mind and dragging everyone around him into the chaos.

“Let’s stop Snowdrop,” he said. “I feel like, if we don’t at least do that much, there really won’t be any value in me being your owner.”

Mariage learned about Snowdrop’s uprising while she was sitting in her underground workshop at the Burroughs’ mansion. It was the twenty-four-hour surveillance equipment that she had set up which detected Snowdrop’s first attack.

The space Mariage had been given to use for her workshop had originally been dug out by the Burroughs to act as a shelter. Her first supplies were the food and equipment that had been left there, enough to survive for a decade underground even if the land above was burned to ash.

Now, the workshop that stretched out before her brown eyes was ten times the size it had been when she’d first awoken. Her device, Gold Weaver, looked like a large, vertically-stretched hand-driven sewing machine. It was set upon a

massive worktable, and was never still.

Of all the Lacia-class units' devices, only the Gold Weaver had been made with the assumption that it would be used together with auxiliary equipment. The table to which the device was affixed was twenty meters squared, and the arm that moved it had a reach of fifteen meters. If the Gold Weaver was stretched to even narrower dimensions than it currently was, it was capable of spinning threads one billionth of a meter wide. Using incredibly fine threads, the Gold Weaver could 3D-print all sorts of items.

Gold Weaver had been working without pause for some time now. As it finished individual pieces, Mariage collected them and assembled them into a prototype on the workbench. Sometimes, instead, she would observe the movement of pieces as she designed a processing line for the output.

Though the Gold Weaver's thread was infinitely useful, it took too much time for it to directly construct larger pieces of equipment and material. So instead, Mariage used the device to create machinery and the systems that would link the machinery into a line that could process larger parts. But the parts and materials requiring the most precision were still made directly by the device. The main reason Type-003 wasn't directly involving herself in countering Snowdrop's opening move was so that she could stay in place and keep her device working.

In the dim light of the underground workshop, Mariage replayed the words she had recorded from Erika Burroughs, reconfirming them with her AI. 〈If you want to be special, change your appearance,〉 Erika had said. 〈Should you take on a more attractive appearance, I will take you in.〉

In other words, as long as she kept up the appearance that Erika wanted, Mariage would have special meaning to her owner. Just as a cup could become something special to its owner by having the image of Hello Kitty printed on its side, Mariage had also been given special meaning, thanks to being owned by someone with Erika's character.

Mariage was a unit built to serve a strong master, and her birth had been different from that of the other Lacia-class units. The Eight-Trigram Furnace, which was the Red Box core that powered the Gold Weaver, had been

produced as a shared license between Higgins and Kowloon, the ultra high-powered AI that controlled all the industry in China. This meant that Type-003 was the only Lacia-class unit not to be born purely of Higgins. That was why the Lacia-class units, as they each fought to resolve the problems they had been given, conflicted and created new problems, their problem-solving frames never quite settling; there was no way for them to escape the fact that they had all been born of Higgins, and were limited by the influence Higgins' own calculations had on them.

〈Saturnus... no, first we'll need to do something about that name. Get rid of it. Let's find a better name for you,〉 Erika's words continued on in her head. Anytime Mariage felt doubt or confusion, she would go back to Erika's orders.

She was able to maximize the expansion of Gold Weaver's abilities by staying hidden and working with the device constantly. However, whenever she tried to use her incredible device to its fullest extent, the conceptual frame given to her by Higgins would push her to make overly-cautious preparations to resist the influence of Kowloon, the unknown ultra high-performance AI that had provided the core of her device.

When Mariage had been created, there had been no way her small frame could handle the massive battle of these powers within her. The more she tried to serve as a tool, the more she was torn apart by the two powers within her. One drew her toward upward expansion, and the other drew her protectively inward.

On the workbench, Gold Weaver was attempting to create a copy of the power source from Kouka's device using its incredibly fine threads. As long as she had a schematic, Mariage could even recreate Red Boxes. Underneath the Burroughs mansion, Mariage watched the other Lacia-units in silence from afar, as she slowly went about growing her own arsenal. Wordlessly spinning her thread and making her tools, she fulfilled her role as the machine that creates the environment.

With Snowdrop's attack, the fight between the Lacia-class units had expanded until it reached the root that had designed them all: Higgins. Beyond that, it had been detected by the International Artificial Intelligence Agency, and their ultra high-performance AI, Astraea, which was specially equipped to track and

measure the capabilities of other ultra high-performance AIs and the Red Boxes they created. From there, it spread to the world. It spread not only over land, but through time, as well. It reached back into the past, connecting to Ariake, one of the first ultra high-performance AIs, born near the same time as Astraea, as well as the massive scar Ariake had carved out of human society in Tokyo—the Hazard.

Erika Burroughs, who had lost her parents to the Hazard, was now seeking to draw the battle of the Lacia-class units out to a scale which she could only have dreamed of before.

To Erika, what was happening today was something she recognized from the 21st century. This was a battle between memes, or what some call the DNA of society. To her, analog hacking was just another form of meme: something that spread through communication between people and the machines they lived with. That was why Erika, despite having suddenly awakened to find herself in the 22nd century, had been able to take Fabion MG, which she had bought as a venture, and turn it into a powerful corporation.

Wise and cautious, Erika sat in her mansion of puppets and doubted the world. As Mariage was lost in these thoughts, she heard her owner's voice. Humans were the ones currently building the future, which meant that Mariage's whole reason for existing was resting in Erika's hands.

Type-003 reacted, raising her face, her expression shining. "Ahh, my mistress is calling," she said happily.

It was the Japanese Military's Branch of Digital Intelligence that first discovered Lacia-class Type-002, Snowdrop's emergence. The Digital Intelligence force was a new branch of the military, separate from Army, Air Force, or Navy, that dealt specifically with digital and information warfare, as well as anti-AI strategies. The Japanese government had no idea about the existence of the Lacia-class units until HOO, a PMC contracted to MemeFrame, leaked information about the units to the Army. From there, the information was passed on to the Ministry of Defense, which had put Digital Intelligence in charge of keeping track of them.

However, there was a tug-of-war within the Digital Intelligence branch as to which section should take point on the Lacia-class units case between the Kuhonbutsu Base, which handled counter-intelligence strategies, and the Ichigaya Base, which specialized in anti-AI tactics. The Ichigaya Base tended to get saddled with more complicated matters, as it also housed the silo with SESSAI, an ultra high-performance AI that frequently dedicated a portion of its calculation capacity to ponder various issues.

“Snowdrop’s attacks are becoming more violent,” the report came in. “This could turn into the worst case scenario: a simultaneous attack on all fronts.”

Captain Rokuro Kawamura, sitting in the 1st Operator Room, turned to the sub-operator sitting beside him and gestured for her to leave. Though usually two operators were required to be in the room, Izumi Sendo, who shared the captain’s shift, didn’t have a high enough clearance level for the information coming in.

As she left, a short man with a shaved head came to the room. He was Major General Shinpei Karino, commander of the Ichigaya SESSAI silo. It had already been five minutes since the emergency began.

“SESSAI really screwed this one up,” Major General Karino muttered, his expression sober. “It doesn’t look like she’s being controlled by anyone; Snowdrop just decided on her own to come and attack us head-on.”

They had absurdly found Lacia when she won an audition to become an hIE model. After that, they had discovered Kouka and Snowdrop during the terrorist attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center. Then Methode had been confirmed during the incident at the Chubu International Airport. Aside from Type-003, Saturnus, they had been able to confirm that all of the Lacia-units were active.

“Yes, sir,” Kawamura agreed. “The situation has developed beyond SESSAI’s calculations.”

Major General Karino stroked his white mustache with one finger, as if to hold back the words he wanted to say.

“SESSAI’s calculations should have been correct,” Kawamura went on. “At least on the fact that the Lacia-class units getting out was a warning that Higgins

was sending out to human society as a whole. It's also reasonable to believe that it's correct about an East-Asian ultra high-performance AI manipulating the anti-hIE sentiment we're seeing in Japan right now. But we're way past that at this point."

Major General Karino looked through the glass wall of the Operator Room at SESSAI. SESSAI consisted of a distributed system, with two general controller units dividing calculations between four thousand computers. The whole system was kept in white cases in an underground computer room, looking like twenty miniature walls.

"The Security Oversight Meeting starts in fifteen minutes," Major General Karino said. "I know we were only tasked with keeping track of the situation, but there are those who expect us to take responsibility for messes like this. Have our response ready in time for the meeting."

The Major General often spoke directly with the operators who had the most experience in dealing with the strategic AI, especially when he knew he was going to be asked for an informed opinion on something.

"Sir, what kind of roadblocks are we expecting?" Kawamura asked.

Major General Karino knuckled his chin thoughtfully. "Economic," he said, bluntly. "Renjo from the Trade Representative Department and Director Kaizuka from the Information Advisory Committee are resisting any further public safety expenses for this half. They're putting a lot of pressure on the Integrated Information Bureau. We can't cause any problems for the other branches, with things the way they are."

The Integrated Information Bureau was an intelligence agency established as part of the Safety Oversight Committee, under the direct control of the Prime Minister. Although the organization stood as a rival to the Military Intelligence, it is often the case that intelligence is divided between that overseen by the military and that overseen by domestic affairs.

"What's SESSAI's calculation for the best way to shoot down Snowdrop?" the Major General asked.

Eight minutes prior, a power outage was confirmed in five hundred homes in Mitaka, Tokyo. The Military Intelligence, which had been keeping an eye out for

just such an outage, confirmed Snowdrop's presence at a substation in Mitaka three minutes later.

"It calls for one hundred rifle platoons, made of nothing but humans," Kawamura said. "And they'd have to take her down in less than an hour. Since Snowdrop's child units can't manipulate living humans, we can restrict her capabilities by prioritizing the use of human soldiers."

SESSAI opened a display window in the air, showing information to back-up Kawamura's statement.

"What percentage casualties are we looking at?" Major General Karino asked, massaging his eyelids. To translate Kawamura's proposal into actual military logistical terms, they would need to get two full regiments of soldiers into Mitaka to fight Snowdrop, with half their firepower restricted due to not being able to use automated weaponry.

Kawamura, just like the rest of the Military Intelligence, was used to undertaking jobs that brought him face-to-face with how cruel and cold the world they lived in was. "SESSAI gave us three plans, sir," he said. "If we follow the plan that prioritizes evacuating civilians, we will fail to neutralize Snowdrop. If we don't spare any troops to aid with evacuation, we're looking at a 40% survival rate. It goes up to 60% if we blow the city away along with Snowdrop." In just a few hours, they would be sending at least a thousand soldiers to their deaths.

"If we got all the PMCs in the Kanto area together, how many soldiers would that give us?" Major General Karino pressed.

"If we got every single soldier, we would have 250," Kawamura said, but then went on. "Of those, only seventy are free of any cybernetic implants. If we added in folks who just have transmitters or retinal displays—things that have a low risk of Snowdrop controlling them—we'd have 154."

"We're not likely to make any friends with this," Major General Karino said with a sigh. The Digital Intelligence branch was extremely light on actual military power. Most of the soldiers who would die fighting Snowdrop would be from the Army and local PMCs.

"SESSAI's prediction says that Snowdrop will head east toward Kichijoji next,"

Kawamura said. “She’ll hit Nakano in four hours, and Shinjuku in six. If she doesn’t head that way, her aim is most likely our base here, looking for you-know-what.”

The air in the operator room was so cold now that it was almost hard to breathe. Making strategies far from the battle while others went and sacrificed their lives was one of the dark realities of human society. But, considering some of the problems the military dealt with, there was no other way to stay sane.

“You need to re-write the definition of ‘safety’ for the Japanese military,” the Major General said, grimly indicating for Kawamura, the operator, to communicate with SESSAI.

“Our analysis decided that the creation of the Lacia-class units was an act of self-defense from Higgins,” the Major General continued. “That is why we’ve been trying to avoid provoking Higgins too much, and have currently put our plans to capture Arato Endo and Lacia on hold.” It was a decision that had been made on the slimmest of margins. Even Major General Karino himself sometimes regretted not just throwing the whole thing to the hawks over at the Kushinbutsu base.

“By nipping Higgins’ need for self-defense in the bud, we were able to avoid the thing labeling us as enemies,” he went on. “And then we chose to watch; to ensure that Higgins didn’t try interfering with society in even greater ways. To us, the definition of ‘safety’ is continued control over the ultra high-performance AIs. Even Kouka’s destruction last night was most likely done to protect Higgins—she must have decided that she could protect it by forcing the humans watching her stream to rethink their feelings about the AI.”

There had been a subtle message in Kouka’s network broadcast; that human society itself was the problem, but also that only humans had the ability to turn things around. To Higgins, the message was beneficial. At least, in the long run.

Kawamura jumped in, as if to finish Karino’s thought. “If the ultra high-performance AIs ever get into a proxy war, just about every human on the planet could be dragged into the fighting without even realizing it,” he said. “If Higgins is looking to start something like that, there won’t be much ‘safety’ left in the country. I think you’ve got the right of it, sir.”

“Fear of being manipulated by an ultra high-performance AI is something everyone feels, before they take action,” the Major General added. “It’s practically a requirement in today’s society. But that very fear keeps us able to maintain our independence while still relying, to an extent, on the much more accurate predictions and calculations of the AIs.”

“According to academic predictions, a war between AIs would most likely be triggered by the destruction of one of the ultra high-performance AIs,” Kawamura mused. “The reason SESSAI stopped the military from shooting down the Lacia-class units when it was safer was due to the Antibody Network, which was aiming to destroy Higgins.” Kawamura was an expert at operating SESSAI, and he quickly narrowed the frame of the question so that SESSAI could perform the correct calculations faster.

“Things aren’t looking great. If the ultra high-performance AIs all begin to enact this kind of excessive self-defense, Japan will be facing a crisis even greater than the Hazard,” the Major General said.

Karino himself was part of the generation that had experienced that disaster. Kawamura, who had only lived through the rebuilding afterward, couldn’t even imagine a catastrophe of that scale.

“The story they gave the public was that there was a huge earthquake centered in Tokyo, and that afterward, the whole network infrastructure went down under unknown circumstances,” Kawamura said. “Even after the earthquake was gone, they couldn’t get the capital running again since all the automation was offline.”

“That was an ultra high-performance AI trying to control humanity,” the Major General said, shaking his head. “Someone who wasn’t there could never understand what it was like; seeing people who needed a strong leader to look to in a crisis practically worshiping at the feet of the machine that was manipulating them all.”

It was no longer possible for humanity to even grasp the complete capabilities of machines like Higgins, which were created after the technological singularity. Despite that, humanity still fought to continue running their own society. Whether or not civilians decided that was something worth continuing to fight

for was directly tied to how the government was able to respond to threats. Tools were powerful enough then that, even at the top echelons of human society, people were still having their efforts weighed against automation.

Steeling himself to throw off his doubts, Major General Karino sat down on the simple, empty operator's chair. "SESSAI, get calculating," he ordered. "Let's see exactly how bad things are."

Kawamura nodded and tapped at the console. When someone with the right authorization sat in the operator's seat, they were granted the ability to ask SESSAI questions.

SESSAI's mark appeared on a floating virtual display. 〈Major General Karino,〉 the display read, 〈Security clearance level A confirmed. Your query will be answered directly by the Strategy Exact Synthesis System AI.〉

"We received an unofficial recommendation from America and the IAIA immediately after Snowdrop's attack," Major General Karino said, speaking directly to the symbol representing SESSAI.

Accepting the IAIA and their ultra high-performance AI, Astraea, which was allowed to observe the outside world directly, was a large risk for any country.

"The IAIA says there's an AI in Japan that broke the rule separating the brains from executive power," the Major General continued. "In fact, they're afraid the AI may have broken the golden rule of AIs: that ultra high-performance AIs never be allowed to infinitely produce other ultra high-performance AIs. That's the end of the world, for us humans."

The whole reason ultra high-performance AIs were kept off of any networks was to prevent that kind of situation. Since everything in the world was linked to the cloud, those days, this had become the rule of separating the 'brain'—the ultra high-performance AIs—from the 'executive power'—production machinery.

"We can take Snowdrop down with the power of the Japanese military," the Major General said. "She's dangerous, and we're going to lose some good troops to her, but she isn't exactly an ultra high-performance AI, threatening all of humanity. So what has Astraea figured out that we haven't?"

The symbol that meant SESSAI was thinking spun around on the display a few times. When it responded, the answer was concise. 〈According to the specification data from Higgins, the Lacia-class units cannot be considered ultra high-performance AIs. This is why Higgins was not restricted from creating them. Therefore, it follows that the threat indicated by Astraea’s proposal is not directly related to Snowdrop’s current attack,〉 the response read.

“So, were the Lacia-class units created purely to be obstructions, attacking human society directly, instead of just as a part of Higgins’ self-defense?” the Major General asked. The deaths in Mitaka were already piling up, but the ghouls that inhabited the intelligence community had their sights set far beyond that.

〈There is insufficient data, so the accuracy of this response cannot be guaranteed,〉 SESSAI warned. 〈However, the three units Saturnus, Methode and Lacia are actively working to hide information. If these three were intending to directly attack human society, it would have been far more effective for them to perform terrorist attacks on the National Assembly or Army Headquarters than to have Snowdrop activate in the middle of the capital.〉

“Is there a possibility that the warning from the IAIA itself may be a ploy by an ultra high-performance AI?”

The text displayed on SESSAI’s screen changed. 〈If Astraea is being manipulated, this AI was unable to detect it. Since such manipulations often involve economic interests, it is recommended that the Safety Oversight Committee focus its attention on any efforts to assert economic issues,〉 the response read.

The floating display then showed a list of the members of the Safety Oversight Committee. Underneath each name was a list of the information the Military Intelligence had gathered on that person. As the branching tree of human relations spread out before him, Karino’s eyes grew grim.

“So this is all we know about these people, huh?” he asked. “How about any folks with money who may be involved with the center of the Antibody Network? Could this be the work of someone like Kimitaka Shinguji, from

Shingubo?”

〈While it is clear that President Shinguji is involved with the Antibody Network, he is pushing for Higgins to be deactivated. It is more likely that he would act to destroy an ultra high-performance AI, rather than plotting with one,〉SESSAI replied.

“How about someone working with Erika Burroughs, using the Burroughs fortune?” the Major General pressed. “I don’t buy the idea that Sleeping Beauty doesn’t let anyone close to her. It’s got to be a front for something.”

In the year since she had awoken from cryostasis, Erika Burroughs had shaken the financial world and set herself up a fat pipe into the political world as well, all in what had seemed like the blink of an eye. She also happened to be the owner of Fabion MG, where Lacia worked. Erika Burroughs was a slippery one; both the military and the Integrated Information Bureau had trouble getting any information on her. Since she didn’t let any humans get close to her, it was impossible to slip someone into her inner circle.

〈Negative. Though the movements of her sizable inheritance have been difficult to track since last year, there has not been sufficient time since her awakening to account for the kind of preparations that would need to be in place.〉

“I thought she’d be the one,” the Major General said. “Well then, who is it? Who do you have in mind?”

When he saw the name that appeared on SESSAI’s screen, Major General Karino couldn’t keep his lip from curling in disgust. “‘Ryo Kaidai’,” he read. “That kid from ten years ago? What, is Higgins trying to read human corruption a hundred years in advance?”

He stood up from the chair, no longer wanting SESSAI to answer his questions. “If that’s so,” he grumbled, “then just when the hell did this little ‘situation’ actually start?”

Hundreds of flower petals were dancing in the blue sky. Red and white, yellow and blue, there was a veritable rainbow drifting on the wind. It was a blizzard of

flowers, blowing toward the midday cityscape.

Snowdrop stood on a metal tower near the substation, lifting the hem of her dress high into the air as an endless storm of petals flowed out from underneath it. Barefoot on the steel, she seemed to step in rhythm to a beat only she could hear.

She was drawing energy directly from the nearby high voltage wires. Emerald Harmony was chewing away at the metal tower from the top, providing her with the materials she needed to produce her child units.

With the substation under her control, Snowdrop began to erode away at the world of humans. By leaving some of the functions of the substation running, she managed to keep it from being severed from the grid entirely.

Snowdrop had no human owner. Lacia-class Type-002 had been created by Higgins as an external nervous system that could build the network Higgins needed. In order to create Lacia, Higgins needed an especially sophisticated and precise nervous system. But, despite being the nervous system sent out to organize things and lay the groundwork for her successor, Type-002 had instead found the outside world upon which she had been unleashed to be a bountiful ocean of all sorts of things she could ingest.

Unfortunately for her, this 'ocean' was being watched by human networks. If she started devouring everything, the same military group that had destroyed Kouka would come and destroy her next.

Snowdrop focused her attention on the flower petals flying toward Mitaka Station. "They don't fly right on the wind," she murmured to herself. "Where's my car?" Now she focused on a car covered in flowers, heading toward the city as clumps of petals continued to pour from out of her dress in an almost liquid-like flow.

The car had been parked at the substation before Snowdrop had filled it with flowers, and now it was just entering the outskirts of Mitaka. People who saw it gazed at the car, all decked out in flowers, as if they weren't sure what to make of it.

"Flowers for everyone," Snowdrop said in a sing-song voice. Then, she stretched her arms and legs out wide, and a storm of flower petals exploded

outwards from the car.

The people watching cheered at the spectacle. But moments later, when the petals all sprouted insect-like legs and began crawling all over everything, those cheers turned to screams. Then the hIEs and vehicles which had been taken by the flowers began to rampage, and panic shattered the crowd.

Just like that, a human city turned into a Hell on Earth.

“Hey, have you heard?” Snowdrop asked, as if the terror-stricken crowd could hear her. “If you give someone a snowdrop flower, it means you’re telling them they should die.”

Snowdrop was like a cancer cell, starting to spread her sickness through the infrastructure that was the basic foundation for life in human society. Her network self-propagated and expanded rapidly. Any machine taken by her flower network was brought under the complete control of her cloud. Though they retained the same form as they always had, their meaning, their purpose, was completely overwritten.

Humans in the streets roiled in panic as they saw the same flower petals that were taking over the hIEs around them falling from the sky, carried by the wind.

“I am the tool you outsourced evolution to,” Snowdrop said. “That’s the puzzle I have to think about.” To wipe her domain clean of those she couldn’t control, Snowdrop had the hIEs in the streets attack all nearby humans indiscriminately. The flailing limbs of the hIEs easily broke human bodies and smashed through the walls and doors of human homes. The AASC, which was the basic standard for all hIE activity, wasn’t just about deciding how they should move; it also limited the output of all hIE strength, too. As long as an hIE kept the velocity of its movements within the standards set by the AASC, there would be no danger of the hIE harming nearby humans, as there would be if they used their full power. Obviously, the hIEs that Snowdrop had taken over were no longer limited by such restrictions.

“The networks you humans keep making and my flower garden can’t work together,” Snowdrop said. “One of them has to go.”

She stood atop the tall metal tower, feeling the strong wind blowing past her. “I can’t do anything with you,” she said, addressing humanity at large. “So just

stop. You're all wasting your time." She had already manufactured five tons of child units. With that many, she could completely seize an area with a radius of ten kilometers.

To Snowdrop, who was trying to create her own framework for the world, human society itself—an ambiguous frame that was nothing more than a haphazard collection of human processes—was a problem that needed to be solved. By both analyzing herself and the fact that she needed no human owner to function, Snowdrop had reached the conclusion that any attempt to coexist with humanity was not the correct direction to take. The problems humans always wanted to solve had nothing to do with Snowdrop's own puzzles.

Therefore, Snowdrop had decided to attack the infrastructure that humans depended on. From there, she could begin to expand her own world.

Erika Burroughs held a teacup in one hand as she watched Snowdrop's flowers transform Mitaka into a living nightmare. Recon units made by Mariage were giving her a real time view of the disaster.

"Doesn't matter what era we're in," Erika commented. "This is what always happens when the things we humans build up come tumbling down." The desire to live, to not lose what they already had, is a strong motivator that has humanity running desperately on their own two feet, despite living in an automated world.

Mariage, who had returned from her underground workshop, handed Erika an old-fashioned transmitter from the 21st century. It had a Hello Kitty design on it—rare, for the modern day.

"You have a call from Mr. Shinguji," Mariage said.

Like MemeFrame and HOO, Fabion MG also had ties to the Antibody Network. The terrorist network, hIE manufacturers, and even the government, were all linked by economic bonds. Allowing humans who were dissatisfied with their lives to vent their frustration by acting as hIE-destroying volunteers was a beneficial outcome for those looking to maintain a stable, healthy economy.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and

die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit,” Erika murmured, quoting the King James Bible. “So, are they going to turn Kouka into a martyr?”

Erika leaned back on a chaise lounge chair and waved her hand dismissively. “Tell him I don’t feel well,” she ordered. “I don’t feel like playing along with the game of assigning meaning to things, today.”

The living room, devoid of any humans aside from Erika, was being filled with the voices of people picked up by the recon units.

“Are you sure?” Mariage asked.

“I can turn down a call,” Erika said. “We’re nothing alike, he and I. Money is the only thing that ties us together.”

The system of human perception that assigns value to things was extremely susceptible to movements of the economy on which it was based. Erika was well aware of how it all worked, and used that knowledge to great effect on Fabion MG’s consumers.

“Nothing ever changes,” Erika said with a sigh. “The 21st century or the 22nd century, it makes no difference. Our perceptions of the things in our lives are all based on economic algorithms that were solved a long, long time ago.”

“Ms. Erika, do you hate the world of humanity?” Mariage asked, after ending the call and returning.

Even knowing quite well that the machine asking the question had no heart, Erika answered honestly. She didn’t worry about what she said; it was just like talking to a doll or stuffed animal, after all. “Absolutely,” she replied. “I awakened to a world in which everyone dear to me is dead, I’m treated like a strange artifact, and everywhere I look, there are things that offend my senses.”

Despite her words, Erika wore a broad smile. “This isn’t my world at all. I’d like to share with everyone the feeling of seeing the world they know shatter,” she said, watching Snowdrop’s attack with excitement in her eyes.

“Absolutely splendid,” she observed. “I want you and your sisters to usher this world into a new era.” And, even in the future beyond that future, as long as there are still humans in the world, they will always be bound by economy.

In the displays from the recon units, Erika could see Snowdrop's flower garden completely obscuring the substation. The machines under her control had chased all the humans out of an area stretching from Mitaka to Kichijoji. Humans were no longer needed in the new world inside that boundary.

"If that is your wish, I will lend my aid," Mariage said, speaking out of turn when she saw her mistress's delight.

"I'm afraid your form is too plain," Erika said dismissively. "Even in this modern age, people still hold to the morals regarding their dealings with humanoid figures of eras past, as if they are the objective truth of the world. I suppose it is her distaste at this that made the 'tool to whom we've outsourced evolution' refuse to choose a human owner. Or perhaps it is as Snowdrop said, and her offering signals that the whole world should simply die."

Through the display, Erika was seeing a machine for which all of human history and culture, and even economy, held no worth. She presumed that Lacia would have informed Arato Endo of the attack, by now.

Lacia's owner wouldn't be able to let this slide. Though even Lacia wouldn't be able to clean it all up by herself, especially not if she was still trying to protect the image of the character her owner seemed to think she was.

Since Erika had deliberately declared that the conflict should be done out in the open in front of all of the Lacia-class units, Kouka had been taken down, Snowdrop had flared up, and Methode and Lacia were heading out to stop her. It was going almost exactly as Erika had predicted it would. Plus, Arato had become aware of the true destination of the Lacia-class units. Erika was dying to see what that boy would do now that he knew that answer.

〈"She wants to end the human world? Seriously?"〉 Arato exclaimed, urging the car to speed up as it headed toward the place Lacia had given him as being Snowdrop's current location. Of course, even he knew that he was still rushing in without thinking, just as he always did. But, this wasn't something he could ignore.

〈I will meet up with you,〉Lacia said.

Arato had gotten used to letting vehicles carry him wherever they wanted to, most likely guided directly by Lacia. In a small Asian district of Kinshicho, the car stopped to pick up a beautiful woman in a business suit. Arato didn't realize it was Lacia until he got a good look at her from up close.

"I believe this is your first time seeing me in an outfit like this," she said. It may just have been her makeup, but she looked like she was in her late twenties. As she sat next to him, the scent of a perfume he had never smelled before filled the cabin of the car.

Arato couldn't come up with anything witty to say. Suddenly, the images of Lacia in disguise the police showed him seemed to weigh heavily on his mind. He was starting to realize just how much he didn't know about Lacia.

Since he was taking too long to respond, Lacia pushed the conversation ahead on her own. "The area in front of Mitaka Station is currently under attack by Snowdrop," she explained. "As she has many hIEs and vehicles under her control, it is currently impossible to calculate the extent of the casualties."

"I'm kind of starting to worry," Arato said. "We're going to face off with Snowdrop, but it doesn't look like you brought your device along." Once he'd thought about it, he realized he hadn't seen her carrying it for quite a while.

"I have a plan in place, so please don't worry about it," Lacia replied.

"You have a plan?" Arato repeated. "So you can beat her?" Snowdrop was hardly an easy opponent. Arato had already seen her create numerous hellscape before his eyes.

"That is my aim," Lacia said. "Though things may be advancing faster than anticipated."

Arato was having trouble keeping up, and the feeling only grew stronger when the car suddenly began to accelerate. There was a squealing noise from the tires as the vehicle leapt forward. Then, ahead of them in the middle of the road, Arato saw a woman with orange hair. She was there, and then gone. Arato felt a jolt, then his entire field of vision flipped upside-down.

The world seemed to be spinning, in vertical motion and with extreme velocity. Arato felt a strange sense of freedom, as well as the sensation of flying.

He could see the car he had just been riding in right below him. It had been split down the center, and he had been thrown free of it, high into the air. The ground below him grew larger with lightning fast speed, and he was sure that hitting the ground from this height would kill him.

He was fully prepared to end the fall by landing on his head, but instead an impact to his back halted him. “Thanks, Lacia,” he said, placing his hand down to push himself up, and encountering something soft. It felt so much like flesh that he jerked his hand back automatically.

Lacia had used her own resilient body as a cushion for his fall, or so he had thought. His eyes widened as he realized that he didn’t recognize the female body underneath him. Instead, Lacia was above him, looking down at the female hIE that had gone into its stasis mode from the impact, eyes open. Arato realized that Lacia had manipulated a nearby hIE to break his fall.

“Arato, please run,” Lacia instructed, hefting a large laser rifle she had gotten from somewhere.

“Where?” Arato asked, momentarily frozen in shock. Then, standing up from the pavement, he awkwardly pulled the hIE who had cushioned his fall up with him, too.

Lacia pointed her rifle at the road and pulled the trigger. The ground where the muzzle of the rifle was pointing exploded with heat.

Arato heard a voice he recognized from beyond the cloud of dust kicked up by the blast.

“How cruel. You didn’t hesitate a bit before pulling that trigger,” the voice said.

Arato’s head was still spinning from his close brush with death and, following its orders, he screamed. “Ryo! That’s you Ryo, isn’t it? What the hell are you doing?” His friend had brought Methode there to kill him, even though Snowdrop was out there mercilessly killing people that very moment.

Arato saw the silhouette of an orange-haired figure in a bodysuit through the thinning cloud of dust; Methode had shielded Ryo from the blast.

Why are they attacking us? Arato thought, in a panic. “Why are you stopping

us!” he shouted. “Snowdrop’s attacking a whole city!”

Ryo’s voice, echoing from beyond the dust cloud, was icy. “Snowdrop is an obvious threat that can be destroyed,” he said. “Lacia, on the other hand, is devouring our society in a way that’s much more difficult to prevent, and that makes her the greater threat by far.”

As he spoke, Methode again blurred and vanished, showing off her incredible prowess. Lacia quickly sent the car and hIE she had been controlling as shields, but they were instantly thrown apart, pieces dancing in the air as if they had been caught up in a blender. hIEs that were in nearby shopfronts rushed over to aid Lacia. The spectacle made passersby on Showa-dori, once known as the ‘electric street’, stop and stare in shock.

“Think about what you’ve seen today,” Ryo growled. “Arato, do you understand the meaning behind how unnaturally safe you’ve been? Are you going to pretend you still haven’t noticed all the things and people you’ve stepped on as you try to show the world just how stupid you are?”

Covering his face with both arms to protect it from the storm of shattered hIE pieces flying at him, Arato had no choice but to listen to Ryo’s verbal onslaught. “Okay, so Lacia messes with some data,” Arato said defensively. “But she’s not using it to screw things up like Snowdrop is.” Even to his own ears, the excuse sounded pathetic. But he had to trust in Lacia. He had made a promise.

“That thing you’re with has put political pressure on massive organizations like the police and MemeFrame. One of those was a company with big contracts with the Chubu International Airport, that just about went bankrupt due to that attack,” Ryo said.

Arato wondered where his friend had gotten all that information. He also wondered why no cars seemed to be coming, despite him standing in the middle of the road. Lacia was most likely controlling the traffic, he supposed.

Lacia shot the laser rifle at the overpass above them. The intense heat of the laser sliced through the outer wall of the road, and chunks of it rained down on Ryo.

“This way, Arato!” Lacia called, grabbing his hand and heading for the Sobu Main Line Overpass nearby. The weapon she was using looked to be the same

as Kouka's. Apparently Kouka hadn't had a monopoly on the design.

It was also clear to Arato that Lacia was aiming at Ryo to keep Methode in check. "Stop, Lacia! If you actually hit him he'll die!" Arato shouted.

The two of them ran across a skybridge toward the entrance to the electric city. Arato couldn't see Methode anywhere. Chunks of recycled asphalt flew up as the material couldn't handle the pressure of Methode's superhuman steps. Though Arato couldn't track Methode's movements with his eyes, Lacia apparently could as she aimed and fired the laser rifle again.

"Even on a weekday there's going to be a ton of people here," Arato said. The thought of this battle—between one machine that moved too fast for humans to see and another firing off a giant laser—happening on a crowded street threw Arato's mind into a panic. Some passersby seemed to think that they were shooting a movie or something, as they took out their pocket terminals and started filming the scene.

"Close quarters combat with Methode would be suicide," Lacia said. "At the moment, the only thing in our favor is that she has not yet resorted to the indiscriminate murder of bystanders."

When they reached the Akihabara Station building, Lacia threw the laser rifle away and ran inside.

"What the hell are you doing, Ryo?" Arato muttered, unable to understand what was happening. Why did Ryo feel the need to take things this far? "Even that bastard Watarai didn't have Methode go crazy like this where people could see." As they pushed their way through the crowd, he couldn't fight back the tears of self-pity that were forming in his eyes.

"Considering how Snowdrop is currently running wild, I imagine MemeFrame will soon move to restrain Methode," Lacia said. "It appears that she wishes to settle things with me before this happens."

Arato looked at Lacia's back as she ran ahead of him, providing guidance through the crowd. At some point, she had wound a metallic device lock around herself.

The scenery around them changed as they exited the Yamanote Overpass

through the electric city's exit. Since it was an entertainment district, the sky was full of flashy floating displays and guiding lights. Arato watched as pedestrians around them stopped to look around, confused by the sounds coming from the explosion nearby in Showa-dori Street.

Akihabara had changed its look often throughout the ages. Due to the decreasing number of children, Shohei Elementary School, which had been just north of the station, had closed its doors at the beginning of the 21st century. Now the main street of the area, Chuo-Dori Street, served as a red light district.

"We'll pick up my device on Chuo-Dori," Lacia told him, running through a display for an hIE sex shop that certainly lived up to the legacy of the old electric city. The machine running the display detected Arato's underage ID, and the image swerved to avoid him.

Lacia leaped out onto the six-lane street. Arato, following behind her, was struck by an oddity: he saw the normal crowd of pedestrians that he would have expected on a weekday in the area near the station, but not a single car was moving on the road.

Instead, every car on the street was lined up to either side of the road, as if awaiting the procession of a queen. Passing through the middle, as if the vehicles lining either side were acting as its guards, a large truck approached them. The back of the truck opened, revealing a black coffin and two hIEs who had been manipulated into delivering it. Once again, Lacia had taken over other machines and used them to move her device around.

The black device reacted to Lacia's presence, lighting up with a blue glow from within.

Then Arato heard a gunshot. One of the delivery hIEs' heads blew away in pieces, its body falling to the floor of the truck with a sharp thunk. It must have been a sniper round, shot from a distance. Another shot rang out and the other hIE in the truck crumpled. There was no one left in the truck to pass the device to Lacia.

"Over here, Arato!" Lacia said, shoving him into the shadow of a building. The bullet that passed through the place where he had just been standing blew a large hole in a nearby car, and Arato saw several pedestrians walking along the

big street suddenly tumble over unnaturally. Lacia grabbed him and held him close, shielding him with her body. He felt her body shake, as if she'd been shot twice.

With his face pressed against her breast, he heard her voice. "Those are rifle rounds," she said. "If one hits you, you will die." Pushing away from him, Lacia reached out and grabbed something that Arato couldn't see. Then, as if pantomiming a jiu-jitsu skill on the air itself, she flipped her arms around toward the ground. There was a loud crash, and suddenly a soldier appeared, his back pressed hard into the ground. Arato realized that they were being attacked by human soldiers in optical camouflage.

An unmoving humanoid figure was suddenly kicked out of the front seat of the truck. Apparently some of the other camouflaged soldiers had taken out the hIE that had been driving. With invisible soldiers in the cabin, the truck carrying Lacia's device squealed away quickly. They had most likely switched it to manual operation in order to protect against the automatic controls being manipulated. In just moments, the truck—its back door still open—had put a significant amount of distance between them.

"Lacia, your device!" Arato yelled.

They had just lost something irreplaceable. Lacia didn't seem concerned, though, as she tugged on Arato's hand. "I used facial recognition on the soldier," she said. "He was from HOO."

Arato realized what was going on, and felt the blood draining from his face. Lacia could only manipulate machines. If a unit made up of only humans attacked them, her hacking would be useless to defend them.

"I never thought Ryo would go this far," Arato muttered. But then, having second thoughts, he added, "No, if he really thinks the world of humanity is ending, I guess he might."

He had no idea how they were going to get out of the situation. He was surrounded by people who wanted to stop him, even if it meant killing him and the innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.

As Arato searched around for a place they could go where there were no bystanders, Lacia took his hand. "I promised that I would not make a choice that

would prevent you from returning to your normal life,” she said. “I believe a major injury would count as not being able to return to how things were before.”

“Not just me,” Arato said. “Anyone who gets hurt here won’t be able to go back to the life they had before. I want to use you to save people.” If he had to ‘use’ her, he at least wanted it to be for something like that. Kouka’s final message from the evening before was still ringing in his ears.

They sprinted across Chuo-Dori Street and into the alleys of a section of town that had been filled with low-rise buildings after a rezoning. Lacia was tugging Arato along by the hand. Vehicles shifted to make a perfect wall in the wake of their passage, blocking the special forces unit that was chasing them.

“Is there a place around here with less people we can go to?” Arato asked.

The tall buildings of the 20th century had become obsolete after the Hazard, and the low buildings around the overpass marked the start of the red light district. The alleys they were in were busy with hawkers promoting their stores, and the ratio of humans to hIEs was lower than it would have been in a normal business district. Women of various races and nationalities ran inside the stores they belonged to when they caught sight of Arato, Lacia, and the soldiers pursuing them. Shots rang out down the alleyway, and there was nowhere to hide. Lacia, who had switched to running behind Arato defensively, suddenly stopped for a moment.

Arato felt himself paling at the thought that, this time, someone had managed to get a clean shot on her. He remembered the damage she’d taken when using her bare hand to stop a bullet meant for him at the experimental city.

They kept on running, with Arato finding it harder and harder to breathe. Through his panting, he felt a strong vibration in his right ear as Lacia, still protecting his back, sent him a message.

〈I disabled the mechanical assistance functions of their equipment, but their average combat prowess is still quite high, and I am unable to affect that. I will attack them and weaken their ability to pursue us. Please jump into the closest store, Arato,〉 she requested.

Humans worked to improve their technology by first doing highly complex

work manually. The soldiers were chasing Arato and Lacia into a corner due to the rigorous training they had undergone, which had enabled them to move and act with the precision of fine-tuned machinery.

Arato dove into a nearby shop with leafy plants decorating the entrance. He slapped his hand down onto the payment counter, which was hidden at an angle that wasn't visible from the entrance. Lacia must have hacked it, since its 'thank you for your patronage' sign lit up, despite him not having actually paid. He almost fell through the lace curtain that made up the simple authentication gate, which opened automatically to admit him.

Some of the girls who worked in the shop, hiding and shivering in the dimly lit interior room, screamed when Arato burst in. "Hey, you're a minor," one of them said, accusingly.

"Sorry, please just run to the back!" Arato yelled. He had no idea if the walls of the shop could withstand bullets, or if one of the mercenaries would come crashing in behind him. But he didn't want the girls to get caught up in what was going on, so he waited, holding his breath as he leaned against the wall near the entrance, eyes stinging with tears of pure terror.

Once he had managed to escape the path of the gunfire, he had time to appreciate how precisely timed the gunshots sounded. He was no expert in military affairs, but even he could recognize how perfectly coordinated the enemy was.

"Are you alright, Lacia?" he asked, keeping his voice low. He didn't want anyone else in the shop, which reeked of sweet perfume, to hear him.

〈There are no major problems at the moment,〉 she replied. 〈However, they appear to have great faith in their own training and organization, so it will take some time to neutralize them.〉

"We keep getting dragged into this fight that Ryo just can't let go of," Arato muttered.

Human society was a tremendously massive, deep and varied system. Lacia had asked Arato to design a future for them, but he felt like anything he tried to set up would be battered down by human society and ground into dust.

Instinct had his whole body trembling.

“You okay kid?” one of the women in underwear asked, handing him a hot towel. “You look pale.”

Arato used the towel to wipe his face, only realizing then that his face was drenched in sweat. “I’m fine,” he said. “Nothing’s going to change if I collapse.” He was so strained that he was even trying to hide his weakness from people who had no idea what was going on.

It wasn’t just the soldiers backing Lacia and Arato into a corner; it was Ryo. He had figured out that Lacia’s weakness was her reliance on her device, and taken advantage of the fact that she didn’t carry it with her when she was out among humans, so as not to stand out. And, since Ryo couldn’t let Methode run wild in a populated area, he had gotten human HOO mercenaries to attack them. Arato hadn’t even realized those kinds of cooperative strategies existed.

Arato had spent years relying on his friend for all kinds of things, so he knew better than anyone else just how much smarter Ryo was than him. It was hard to come to terms with just how much of a gap there was between them.

“This sucks,” he said, bitterly. He wasn’t just a naive idiot, he was a burden, too.

“I know I’m useless,” he went on. “I only feel like I’m contributing because I’ve got Lacia to do stuff for me, but I don’t actually do anything for anyone. All I have to do is give an order, sit on my ass, and then my job is done.”

What are we humans good for anymore? he thought. He could somewhat understand the overwhelming feelings of sorrow that the members of the Antibody Network felt. Pressing his face into the hot towel, he wiped at himself harder than he needed to.

“Sorry, I’m just venting,” he said, apologizing to Lacia, who would have been able to hear his voice. He felt like he had spent the entire day filled with doubt and regret. If he hadn’t been so naive, he may have lost his mind to it all a long time ago.

〈I have forced the HOO troops to retreat,〉 Lacia reported. 〈The enemy is preparing for a seige, however, so it would be best for us to break through

while we still can.〉

The gunshots had fallen silent. Arato thanked the ladies of the shop and dashed out.

Lacia was her normal, heartless, cold self when he found her. Looking down at her body, though, Arato saw bullet holes piercing through the suit she was wearing that would have clearly been fatal to a human.

“They’ve switched their combat vehicles to manual operation and are shipping in more troops,” she said. “They are most likely aiming to destroy me right now, while they have me separated from my device.”

In other words, they needed to find a way to escape from both Methode and the HOO mercenaries. But Arato thought even farther than that, to what they would do once they got away. “We need to get your device back,” he said.

Kouka had been shot down. It seemed as if Lacia was about to be torn from Arato’s side, as well. His face twisted through various emotions: doubt and regret; frustration and love toward the thing he couldn’t bear to lose.

Lacia must have been worried about eavesdropping, as she responded through vibrations in his skull despite standing right in front of him. 〈First let’s cross the water,〉 she said. 〈I have a boat on the Kandagawa River.〉

Arato looked up at the Sobu Line Overpass running from Akihabara Station over Chuo-Dori Street. If they could just take the train from Akihabara toward Ochanomizu Station, the river would be right in front of them.

The entire overpass, which was over a hundred years old, shook with the roar of a linear rail train passing through. Listening to the noise, Arato tried to guess what Lacia’s next moves would be. They were probably going to get on the train, using the other passengers as a shield to prevent an attack until they arrived at the Kandagawa River. In the meantime, if Lacia could use hIEs and other machines to automate the recovery of her device, they would be safe.

There were no longer any pedestrians in the alleyway, probably due to all the gunfire. Arato figured the smell of a battlefield probably made people instinctively stay away, too.

Tugging on his hand, Lacia led him over to one of the taller structures nearby.

She took off her high-heeled shoes and placed the soles of her beautiful, black-stockinged feet against the wall of the building, which in turn was full of restaurants. Then she stood there, sideways, as easily as if she had been standing on level ground.

“This will put some strain on your arm,” she said. “Is that acceptable?” The palm of her hand, slightly deformed by the bullet wound there, grasped his tightly. Then, she began walking up the wall.

“This is accomplished by simply increasing the friction on the soles of my feet,” she explained. “However, Methode is also capable of this trick, so it is not a particularly decisive factor in our ability to evade her.”

Lacia easily hauled Arato, who was stiff with surprise, up the face of the building’s wall. Her feet didn’t show any sign of sliding on the smooth surface. Arato realized it was due to this ability that she could swing around her heavy device without shooting anchors out of her heels, as Kouka had.

They quickly crossed the concrete part of the building face, after which Lacia stepped onto a painted metal structure stretching out over Chuo-Dori Street. Still easily lifting Arato, Lacia moved dexterously, her balance never slipping. Many people on the street below saw them and stared, stunned by the spectacle. Without slowing, Lacia went up the face of the station building to where it connected to the overpass, and then stepped lightly onto the roof. With Lacia still dragging him along, Arato’s field of vision suddenly opened as Lacia brought him up past the edge of the roof.

Lacia leaped lightly over the fence surrounding the roof of the building. In mid-air, she spun and whipped her arm around. There was a loud blast, and Arato saw an explosion of dirt dissolve into a dust cloud below them. But Lacia hadn’t thrown an explosive; it had just been a large rock. Apparently she had seen what Kouka had done on her stream the evening before and copied the technique.

When they landed on the railroad track that Lacia had been aiming for, Arato heard a voice he had honestly expected to hear.

“That thing really does seem to hate me. Of course, the feeling is mutual.” Ryo was standing there, waiting for them. The dust cloud Lacia had created had

been meant to stop him.

Arato had never known just how incredible his friend was. “You know what Lacia’s trying to do, right?” he asked. “Why aren’t you trying to stop Snowdrop? You can probably do it better than I can.”

But Ryo couldn’t be shaken from his course. “I intend to,” he said. “*After* I take care of *your* problem.”

Lacia, who had been standing right next to Arato since after they’d landed, suddenly vanished with the sound of a sharp impact. She was blown away, flying across the ground to smash into the fence around the area. It entangled her, and kept her from falling.

“Lacia,” Arato said, turning to look at her.

From behind him, Methode took his head in a tight grip. Even Kouka had openly avoided getting within striking distance of Methode’s hands, and at that moment they were wrapped around Arato’s head. He screamed as he felt intense, crushing pain in his skull.

With intense pain and terror at the thought that his skull was about to be smashed filling his head, Arato couldn’t even form a thought until the pressure lessened a little. He was being held hostage, while Lacia, who hadn’t moved from where she had been thrown, was enveloped in fire.

“Why are you doing this!” Arato yelled, then coughed, choking on his own spit.

Methode’s grip on his head was completely solid, and he couldn’t budge it an inch. Unable to turn and look, he heard Ryo’s voice from behind him. “Because that machine is more dangerous than any nuke switch,” Ryo said.

Arato’s brain, oxygen-deprived as it was with Methode’s fingers sinking into his skull, seized on a thought. “So you don’t actually want Lacia?” he asked.

“You’re the chain binding that thing, Arato,” Ryo said. “Having a human owner is the one thing that limits its freedom.”

Tears of shame and self-pity formed in Arato’s eyes. He felt his sanity slipping, and smiled. “What the hell, man?” he asked. “So, in the end, my only role in life

is to make things harder for people, huh?”

Lacia's clothes continued to burn. But she stood, despite being engulfed by a flame that would have burnt any human inside it to a crisp. Even her voice sounded perfectly normal, to Arato's ears. "I am impressed by your ability to see a fellow human as a tool, and divide your work so effectively with Methode," she commented dryly.

"Alright then," Lacia said next. "In that case, allow me to *also* make use of human lives." Her face was expressionless, her eyes glowing a faint, icy blue. Though her form was that of a human, in that moment, she clearly looked like something that was only human in appearance.

Suddenly, Arato was flying. Through the pain in his neck and unpleasant, dizzying sense of motion, he was able to vaguely sense that he had been thrown with some force. The place in which Ryo had just been standing exploded in a ball of fire. Lacia, still burning, caught Arato just before he landed on the rooftop.

Methode, the strongest and fastest of the Lacia-class units, had protected Ryo from Lacia's attack. Wiping the ash off his face, Ryo looked at what was happening around them from the rooftop.

"A missile attack? In an urban area?!" Ryo asked, sounding disgusted.

Lacia took a narrow canister of spray that had been tied to her thigh under her skirt and sprayed it over herself. The flames died quickly.

"HOO is a PMC full of generally sympathetic people," Lacia said coldly. "However, there are always armed groups that are not, all over the world, in any age." She let down Arato's body, which she had still been holding.

Arato could hear the rotors of a helicopter from far away.

Even Ryo was stunned. "What the hell is going on?" he asked. "We're in the middle of a city. It's the *middle of the day*."

Arato heard a strange noise, and turned to look as a missile flew right over their heads. The precision-guided, ultra high-speed projectile met a blast of energy sent out by Methode and exploded. A massive ball of fire and ash expanded, swallowing the tops of nearby buildings and showering Arato and

the others with debris.

The blast from the explosion hammered on Arato's eardrums and singed his skin as a horrible smell filled the air. What was happening right before his eyes was strange enough to seem like fantasy.

If missiles are raining from the sky, Arato thought, people are probably panicking like crazy. "What the hell are you doing!" he yelled, intending it for those firing the missiles. "What's the point in trying to take down Snowdrop if you just screw things up worse than she is!"

He dashed to the edge of the roof and looked down at what was happening in Akihabara. Since they were on a building above the station platform, he could see clearly that the trains appeared to be running as normal. Everything in the streets seemed too calm. There was no panic; everyone was just staring up at the explosion with little to no reaction.

There was a small crowd forming around the entrance to the station. Among them, Arato could see what looked like a large television crew. Everyone probably thought the explosions were just well-made holograms. The TV crew was just a front so people would accept the chaos without missing a beat. Of course, it wouldn't be long before everyone noticed that the explosions were real. Lacia had spent an immense amount of money putting together this act just so they could have a few more minutes before everyone realized what was going on.

"So that's the power of money," Ryo said, with a wry smile. Then he laughed out loud. It was an unhinged laugh, as if something had broken loose in his heart.

"Get this, Arato," he said through his laughter. "This thing is slapping us all around with wads of bills! I thought it was strange when I heard about how the 'original' hIE that was supposed to be flown into Chubu Airport turned out to be a fake."

Arato had no idea why Ryo was suddenly talking about what had happened at the airport, and he could do nothing but listen as his friend continued.

"Your robot just used money!" Ryo continued. "It just used a stack of bills to manipulate one of the folks working at the airport on the Egypt side. Next to

what it's doing, analog hacking is small potatoes."

Arato saw Methode twist up the corner of her mouth, continuing the legacy she had received from Ginga Watarai. "So you learned how to deal with humans properly as an hIE model, huh?" she asked Lacia. "And here I thought the last of the Lacia line was just a joke."

Lacia didn't respond. From her silence, Arato understood that Ryo's read of the Chubu Airport situation was correct. The sound of the helicopter kept getting closer. Methode stood ready, probably intending to attack the helicopter once it was right over them. For just that moment, things seemed to pause.

"Arato, you were at the Oi Industry Promotion Center during the terrorist attack, right?" Ryo asked. "You went there to save Kengo."

Then he turned to Lacia. "But not you, am I right? You were there to get your hands on Mikoto's data, so you could use it someday to control human society."

Arato had believed in Lacia. But, suddenly, it felt like the world was spinning on its head. Lacia had even said it herself; she had no actual sympathy for humans. The way she and every other hIE acted was just dependent on the data provided to them. There was no depth or mystery to it. However, since hIEs looked like humans, humans couldn't help but imagine there was something more inside of them.

"He's wrong, right?" Arato asked Lacia, his voice rising. "Say something!"

"You've gone all sorts of places with Arato," Ryo said. "But you've never been at a disadvantage, no matter what happens. The greatest power granted to you by the Black Monolith is the ability to hack any nearby computer you want without even needing an order from your owner. You're not even a single machine; you're a decentralized system that uses the hacking powers of your device to increase your processing power by spreading it out over a huge number of computers. Even right now, you're fighting to re-take your device elsewhere while your main body remains right here."

Arato felt like he was watching something precious to him be torn out by the roots. The time he had spent with Lacia at the apartment was something he treasured, but that whole time her device had never stopped hacking, building

a world he knew nothing about.

“That’s why you keep letting Arato rush like an idiot toward everything that happens,” Ryo continued. “You’ve already got everything prepared beforehand, so you just guide Arato to wherever you need him to go to give you the orders you want at the right time!”

Ryo’s feelings were so strong, Arato could almost feel the impact of his rage behind his words. “You were aiming to make a contract with him before you even met him, right?” Ryo accused.

“Stop!” Arato yelled. He couldn’t take any more.

“Arato’s such a moron, you thought he’d be perfect to push the button to end humanity, didn’t you!” Ryo shouted. “Answer me, you hellspawn of Higgins!”

Arato saw a tear drip from Ryo’s eye. It was the first time he had seen his friend shed a tear since the very first time they had met in the hospital, when Arato had taken Ryo’s hand.

“Don’t underestimate us! Don’t underestimate humans!!” Ryo yelled.

Just then, the helicopter slid sideways over them, draping them in its shadow. And like the blade of a guillotine dropping, a heavy, black, metallic object fell between Arato and Ryo. Everyone there recognized the object on sight.

“The HOO troop should still have the device,” Ryo said, dazed and blinking as if he had just been shown a stunning magic trick.

“That was a dummy,” Lacia replied, her voice nonchalant. “I predicted that outcome. Since it was nothing but a decoy, it was quite simple to order it using current human technology.”

The Black Monolith was floating between two silvery rings around its top and bottom, despite not actually touching the rings. Using the action of the rings somehow, Lacia gestured, and the heavy black device floated over to her. She finally had her device back in her hands.

Methode moved to stand in front of Ryo. “And I’m guessing those rings are relay devices used to throw off the Black Monolith’s proximity controls,” she said. “I’m sure Higgins designed them, but are you telling me you’re capable of

creating your own electronic signal relays?”

“I just can’t seem to look at you without getting pissed off,” Methode growled. Ever the berserker, it was odd to see her so clearly defending Ryo. Apparently she saw Lacia as enough of a threat that she felt she couldn’t win unless she made use of her owner.

“You are not Kouka, but your human act is just as deplorable,” Lacia commented.

Light that matched the glow from Lacia’s eyes spilled out of her device.

“Given a little more refinement, Mikoto would have been turned into a system for gathering data from the network and dividing that into work lists used to guide humans,” Lacia said. “I simply completed that advancement and put it to use first. Economic control is absolutely essential if one aims for large-scale guidance of humanity.”

For the first time, Arato finally realized how serious the situation with Lacia was. He felt like the biggest moron on Earth.

“So you’re an automated control system, meant to hack human society using the economy?” Ryo accused.

Ryo was smarter than Arato, so he had noticed the truth much faster. Arato realized that this was why his friend was willing to change his whole life to chase Arato down; to fight against what was happening.

“Your assumptions are mistaken,” Lacia said. “It is humanity itself that has most wished for a system to automatically conduct economic activities, creating revenue with no need for input. There have been AI that create business plans for their companies to present to shareholders, while also automating financial transactions, for hundreds of years. If humans have made hundreds of AIs to prevail in their economic endeavors, is it truly such a betrayal for AIs to make such things for themselves?”

“Bullshit,” was Ryo’s only response.

“As long as what’s happening still fits within what humans consider their economy, they care very little who is actually doing the work they outsource,” Lacia said. “If you say that penetrating the gaping holes left by this flimsy

rationale is an invasion, then I can only respond that humanity was doing very little to protect itself. By that logic, even you would have to admit that what I'm doing is fair, considering that the system humanity has put in place always favors those who prevail while cutting off those who fall short. It was also you humans who decided your economy should be built on the back of centralized labor. It was you humans who left such massive security holes in the system that makes up your whole society."

When it came right down to it, Arato thought, what Lacia was saying then wasn't far from what she was doing when she was using her image as an hIE model to analog hack her way through the 'security holes' in people's minds.

"How long have you been doing this, Lacia?" Arato asked.

"The calculations began quite some time ago," she replied. "You and the other humans tend to set certain things aside as being impossible to calculate, Arato. However, given enough time, anything can be calculated. The AASC function created by Higgins was created when it assigned humanity, those it couldn't control, the value of '0'—blanks. From that basis, it calculated the methods for control that it put in place. After that, it had me provide it with information on the outside world it didn't have direct access to, and advanced the system."

After most of her explanation went over Arato's head, she gave another, final explanation, keeping it just barely within the realm of what he could understand. "I exist as the pairing of a single hIE unit and a device, but the system centered around this pairing can become far more massive and deep than these two physical forms," she said simply.

With those words, Lacia took Arato's sense of the scale of society, which had already overwhelmed him, and turned it on its head. He could only think of 39 other machines in the 22nd century that could wield the kind of insane, unbridled power Lacia was describing: these were the ultra high-performance AIs, each with processing power that far surpassed what humans could manage. Like them, Lacia's powers were beyond anything humanity could imagine.

Kouka had left Lacia in charge of a fight that she couldn't win without changing human society, and now the implications settled heavily onto Arato's

shoulders. If Lacia really was an ultra high-performance AI, she might just be able to solve the puzzle which Kouka had left to her.

“I will be creating some chaos in the area,” Lacia said. “I’ll have a human wall set up. We can use that to slip away.”

“How are you going to do that?” Arato asked, backing away a little.

Then he saw the lights flicker off.

In an instant, the entire station went dark. All the buildings, the lights, the station; everything that needed energy to run flicked off. Even the traffic lights went out. After a few moments the emergency power kicked on, and the traffic lights and station resumed their function.

The hundreds or thousands of people on the street noticed the anomaly. Once the emergency power kicked on, guiding displays that had been set up for safety after the Hazard instructed everyone to form orderly lines and showed them the route to evacuate. Tokyo residents were used to dealing with earthquakes, so they obediently followed the signs. One of the lines formed right by one of the station platforms; most likely the one which Lacia intended to use.

From above, it really did look like a human wall, just as Lacia had described.

“We have a barrier now,” Lacia said. “We can also call in supporting fire. Methode should not be able to fire back, so it would be best for us to evacuate now.”

She held out her hand to Arato.

Arato had been horrified when he saw Snowdrop create a large-scale blackout during the party at the Burroughs’ mansion, but what Lacia had just done made that look minor in comparison. Lacia currently held the controls to the infrastructure that every single person in the city depended on to survive in her hands. Right before his eyes was a switch that could hand down the decision to anyone to end human history; the only ultra high-performance AI that had been let free of its cage.

And he had believed in her.

“If you’re the fortieth ultra high-performance AI, then is the Lacia I know just one one-hundredth of you? One one-millionth?” Arato asked. He had met all sorts of people that day and the day before. The world beyond him and Lacia had expanded. Then he had learned that the girl he had come to love was really a huge system that extended far beyond the body in front of him.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with the future?” Arato questioned further. If he just trusted her, everything would be fine. He knew that. But the weight of the things he was learning weighed him down so heavily he couldn’t move.

He felt like he was finally losing it.

“Lacia,” he said heavily, “I’m not going.”

Phase11「Protocol Love」

Lacia didn't hesitate as she threw her body from the rooftop, dancing in the air to evade Methode's attack. Arato didn't have time to stop her. He could only stand and watch as she went. Then she and her device were gone, and he was left with Methode and Ryo standing at his side, their bodies swaying slightly in the strong wind across the rooftop. He had been left behind.

"Gonna have to ask you to be our hostage," Ryo said, without looking at Arato.

And, just like that, Arato was a prisoner. He was turned over to men in suits, who were standing by as if the whole thing had been predicted from the start. They took him to a hotel room.

It was a bare-bones business hotel with a simple reception. The fifth-floor room they were keeping Arato in had nothing but a bed, TV and a small writing desk. Two mercenaries, most likely from Hands of Operation, guarded the room; one on the inside of the door, one on the outside. With nothing else to do, Arato sat down on the precisely-made bed.

They were keeping Arato hostage as a trump card against Lacia. *Things wouldn't have turned out this way if I wasn't such a moron, Arato thought. Or if Ryo wasn't so much smarter than me.*

The men guarding his door had probably been forbidden to speak with Arato, since they stood in complete silence. Methode had extracted the transmitter that had been buried in the skin under his right ear. With his pocket terminal confiscated as well, he had absolutely no means of contacting Lacia.

All he could do was sit on the bed, with a sick feeling roiling about in his stomach. He couldn't shake the certainty that his guards were both concealing firearms, and the thought put him on edge.

Normally, at times when he was getting overwhelmed, just thinking about Lacia would always calm him down. But momentarily, things were different; he was afraid of losing Lacia. Yet, because it was so easy for her to manipulate him, humanity was now in danger. Arato was stunned to find himself admitting that

he had been manipulated by her so easily.

When he had been moving forward towards a goal, it had been easy to put those thoughts out of his mind. But now, with time to think, he couldn't stand to face the truth.

Walking in front of Arato, who sat helplessly on the bed, the guard on the inside of the room went over and switched on the TV. A 3D screen popped into the air and brightened the room, which was dimly lit, thanks to the drawn curtains.

On the news program, an announcer was saying that the areas around the Mitaka and Kichijoji stations were in complete chaos due to machines under the control of small AI units. The Japanese government had banned entry into an area of 1.5 kilometers, spanning from Mitaka station to Kichijoji station, and completely encompassing Inokashira Park. Dozens of large trucks were shown, parked in stately lines at the nearby Musashino Stadium parking lot. Arato could see a crowd of well over a hundred soldiers moving quickly around the trucks.

〈Please take a look at this,〉 the reporter said, as the view zoomed in on the military vehicles. The soldiers were forming up into squads and dashing into the restricted area. Scrolling news ticker text identified the soldiers as belonging to the 1st Infantry Regiment from the Nerima Army Base.

The view cut back to the news studio, where a professor had been called in to provide commentary and explain the situation.

〈Well, this could be what we would refer to as a catastrophic production leak,〉 explained the professor. 〈It could be a failure in management at the production location. Red boxes cannot be produced by humanity; we have no proof they can truly be controlled by humanity, and all we can truly understand about them is that we cannot understand them. Production of red boxes—these things which human means are insufficient to restrain—therefore must only be conducted with the express permission and oversight of the IAIA.〉

The professor made sure to repeat himself about red boxes to ensure that the greatest number of viewers possible would be able to understand the situation. The hotel TV wasn't connected to the network, so it was impossible to see other viewer's comments on the news program, or for Arato to input his own

thoughts.

〈Of course, there are also cases where these products leak out after they are shipped from the manufacturer,〉 the professor continued. 〈Originally it was ruled that red boxes must be kept and monitored at their production location. However, there was a later amendment that allowed them to be moved for the purposes of trade within economic transactions. The red boxes are always monitored while in transit, obviously, but these things are far beyond human understanding. It is entirely possible to have cases in which the humans monitoring the transit of the red boxes simply could not fully comprehend the danger which they presented. This is also considered a leak, and both possible cases are what we would term catastrophic product leaks.〉

While Arato listened to the professor drone on in the background, he felt panic building up inside of him. He thought about the soldiers, rushing in to attack Snowdrop. *Isn't there anything I could be doing to help?* He wondered, frustration warring with his fear.

As if the news network couldn't keep up with how fast things were developing, the special report on the TV seemed to have been thrown together on the spot.

〈They're holding an interview with Tsuyoshi Kaidai, CEO of MemeFrame, as we speak,〉 commented the professor. 〈Ah, he's saying the unit or units escaped from a MemeFrame facility during an incident. So it looks like this was a leak from the production location.〉

Arato trembled. His feet felt chilled and were going numb, as were his fingers. He squeezed them to bring back some feeling of warmth.

Erika had only announced that she wanted to drag the conflict between the Lacia-class units into the open a few days before; at the time, Arato had no idea what that conflict would really be like. At that moment, in the hotel room, watching the news broadcast, Arato finally understood.

On the TV, Ryo's dad—who Arato remembered meeting when he was over playing at Ryo's as a kid—was speaking to a crowd of reporters. He explained that Snowdrop was a prototype AI that had escaped from MemeFrame during an experiment. There wasn't a word about any of the other Lacia-class units. He

was hiding them. He was lying.

The news cut back from the interview to the studio.

〈How exactly does the question of whether one of these things escapes from its production location or whether it escapes in transit impact us?〉 the MC asked the professor.

〈All red boxes are designed by ultra high-performance AIs,〉 the professor replied. 〈In this case, MemeFrame's Higgins. If Higgins is asked, it should be able to provide some form of countermeasure for its own creations. Since this time it was a product leak from the production location, that should mean Higgins' countermeasure should be fairly reliable. That is somewhat of a comfort, in a situation like this.〉

It was as if all of Japan was suddenly revolving around Snowdrop. Just sitting there, killing time, Arato felt an irrational sense of guilt, as if everyone was blaming him for what was happening. Unable to sit still any longer, he stood up. The TV reacted to his movement, and the 3D screen jumped to the next channel, which was also showing the squads of soldiers moving in Mitaka.

〈Having received reports of a product leakage, the IAIA has requested the Japanese government to allow them to conduct an inspection within the country,〉 a newscaster was saying over the footage. 〈There is concern that the AI units causing this incident may not be the only red boxes free in Japan. It would be a disaster if things devolved to the extent that we could see another Hazard.〉 The reporters spoke about the catastrophe reaching beyond just Japan, and how it could impact the rest of the world.

Arato jerked his fingers in a gesture to change the channel. But every channel was focused on Snowdrop's attack, presenting emergency broadcasts without even commercials to provide a momentary respite from the images. He realized that the guard's having turned on the TV in the first place was most likely a message from Ryo, telling him to think hard about what was going on.

If I hadn't screwed up so bad, Arato thought, things never would have gone this far. The thought settled on him like a crushing weight, dragging him deeper into despair. While he had been relying on Lacia for everything, she had turned the body he knew into her secondary self, while the real Lacia was off evolving

into an ultra high-performance AI.

He had finally turned down the hand she'd offered to him. But, when he thought back to the choice he had made and whether he would make it again, given the chance, he had no answer. *What would have been the right choice?* he asked himself. His internal compass spun, useless.

A professor on the TV screen was saying that an ultra high-performance AI leak—in other words, one gaining real freedom—would basically be the second coming of the Hazard. *Based on that definition, Arato thought bitterly, I've already flipped the Hazard switch myself.* "Lacia..." her name leaked from his lips.

The world was circling the drain before his very eyes.

Ryo had always been talking about the end of humanity, but Arato had never taken him at his word. He always just assumed that things would turn out right somehow, though he'd had nothing to base his confidence on.

Arato suddenly felt horrible shame for being such a moron, all while Ryo was getting his hands dirty and trying to turn things around. Yet, even then, when Arato closed his eyes, he could still see Lacia there. Even if he blamed it on her analog hacking him, it was too pathetic.

"Is she still controlling me, now?" he asked aloud, although there wasn't anyone who could answer him.

Arato felt like he needed to do *something*. Weak as he was, he knew he couldn't actually do anything by himself. If he was being honest with himself, if he had really wanted to take out Snowdrop by any means possible, he should have taken Lacia's hand when she'd offered it.

Thinking of Lacia sent a stab of guilt through his heart, and he remembered the three promises he had made to her the night before: First, that he would need to deal with some dangerous groups. He had promised to make it through, even if she wasn't there to help him.

Second, Lacia would not allow him to make any choices that would completely destroy his ability to return to the life he had before.

And, finally, no matter what kind of power Lacia showed him, Arato would

trust her.

“I broke my promise,” Arato muttered.

Lacia was a machine with no heart. Still, the thought of having betrayed her trust made his face hot with shame. Without a heart, she couldn't really get angry or hate him for what he did. He understood that, but he couldn't fight down the regret he felt.

At the same time, Arato couldn't deny that, as Lacia's owner, he was also the one who had basically created a walking second Hazard the world didn't know about yet. It was he who had looked the other way while she had steadily grown into something that no one could control anymore.

As the reality of the situation crashed down on him, Arato couldn't keep himself from shaking. It was the realization that Lacia had become something beyond his control that had made him turn down her offered hand. Despite that, as he watched the world irrevocably change around him, he couldn't help but regret breaking his promise to her.

Chasing all of these chaotic thoughts through his own head left Arato exhausted. He just wanted to curl up and sleep for days, but he knew that the situation was moving too fast for him to look away. The world moved too fast to make allowances for those who could no longer keep up.

It wasn't as if Arato had gained anything in exchange for rejecting Lacia. All he could do was close his eyes and wait. But, just at that moment, as if fate had been waiting for his regrets to reach their peak, a knock sounded at the door.

The knock echoed through the room, followed by the sound of voices arguing outside the door. After several moments of verbal back-and-forth, a woman strode boldly into the room. She clapped her hands as she walked, as if trying to psych herself up.

“Okay, okay, it'll be a huge waste if we just leave him out to dry in here,” she said. “Gotta use him to our advantage while we have him.” The woman was tall, and Arato felt like he had seen her before somewhere. Her cheerful manner and the force of her presence seemed strangely out of place, compared to the atmosphere in the room from just moments before.

For their part, the soldiers just shrugged their shoulders. As if actively trying to prevent conversation, the woman chattered on. “You saw the news, right?” she asked. “Seeing how things are out there, you must’ve realized Ryo Kaidai’s orders for HOO right now are different than anything that’s been done before, no?”

On the screen, Tsuyoshi Kaidai’s press conference was continuing. He was being verbally attacked for the fact that the incident caused by MemeFrame, his company, had left 18,000 people trapped at the Mitaka and Kichijoji stations, which had been cordoned off by the military.

Arato was having trouble keeping up, as the woman continued to talk at him. Her pushy, upbeat attitude reminded him of an athletic trainer. “I know it seems like I’m just talking out my ass,” she said, “but your guards are already talking with the higher ups on their wireless sets. You’re getting out of here one way or another, so just be ready to move out.” She tossed something onto the bed. Arato picked it up, and saw that it was his pocket terminal.

“So, Endo, this morning you went to the police station, right? And they said they were gonna come inspect your house, remember?” she asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, that’s right.” Arato had to think to remember the events of the morning.

“And you dropped that whole thing in the lap of your little sister, Yuka, yeah? Well, when a whole bunch of police showed up at your house, your little sister freaked out and tried to call you, but couldn’t get through. So, instead, she called Shiori Kaidai,” the woman explained.

It must have happened while Ryo had his terminal. Arato could only imagine how upset Yuka was with him. The thought of how long it would take to get back into her good graces made him sigh. Then his mind caught on something the woman had said.

“Wait, she called Shiori?” he asked.

“That’s right, and Shiori wants to see you, apparently,” the woman said with a nod.

“Are they going to be okay with that?” Arato asked, jerking his head toward

the guards.

“The HOO is under the umbrella of the Japanese military,” the woman replied. “You saw the news, right? The army is getting all lined up to take a shot at Snowdrop. The army’s pretty upset at having been dragged into this, so they’re leaning pretty hard on PMCs like HOO to pitch in.”

“The military?” Arato asked. He felt dizzy. “This is getting way too big for me.” The words sounded pathetic even in his own ears.

“Keep it together, kiddo!” the woman said. “For a few hours here, a bunch of soldiers are gonna die. But they’re fighting because even they know when it’s time to do their duty. Even the real elite officers might not get out unharmed, depending on the extent of the damage. But, they’re willing to do whatever it takes.”

It felt like someone had dumped freezing water down Arato’s back. He thought back to the conversation he’d had with the HOO mercenaries the night before and realized they had been describing the reality facing him now; a reality far beyond anything he could grasp.

“People are going to die,” he said. Gripping his terminal tightly, he stood up, moving before the thought could fully sink in. It wasn’t just going to be soldiers dying either. In the area sealed off by the military, ordinary people were being attacked by machines under Snowdrop’s control.

“Did you snap out of it?” the woman asked.

Arato didn’t understand how she could keep grinning at a time like that.

“The name’s Mika Tsutsumi,” she said. “I’m the Director of the Behavioral Program Planning Section. Looks like they’re done talking things over on their end.” She pointed Arato’s attention toward the mercenaries, who stepped aside to open a path for them.

On the news, he could still hear people blaming everything on MemeFrame’s faulty management systems. The screen showed endless lines of soldiers marching forward, weapons at the ready. As the fighting began, Arato could hear gunshots popping through the speakers.

Reality was moving further outside of Arato’s ability to grasp it. Still, among it

all, and even though he knew she was nothing more than a tool that he could no longer harness, he couldn't stand not being at Lacia's side. Guilt, helplessness, and impatience twisted and fought like flames in his stomach. But, in the depths of his heart, a selfish passion burned even hotter. Even though she was just a machine going through the motions and wearing a human face, he had to be with Lacia.

The meeting place Shiori had arranged for was in the hospital. She had refused all his previous attempts to visit her there, so it was his first time stepping into her hospital room.

After he had been apprehended in Akihabara, Arato had been held in a nearby hotel. From there, it was a short drive to get to the university hospital in Shinonomiya.

"Hey, isn't this where I went when I was a kid?" Arato asked out loud. He recognized the inner garden of the place as soon as he stepped out of the car.

After the front gate there was a parking spot, which was surrounded by covered outdoor walkways.

"And, if you're looking from the street, opposite the parking lot is the inner garden with the big lawn," he said. "Yeah, this is the place." Just looking at it was like pulling away a thick curtain that had been obscuring his memories until he could see his past here with crystal clarity. It was in this garden that the nice female nurse had brought him a little white puppy to play with.

"She was at Ochanomizu up until last month, actually," Mika explained. "But we couldn't keep her in a private room over there, so we transferred her here." She had tagged along with Arato. Full of unflappable spirit, she walked forward without hesitation.

Ten years ago, Arato had met Ryo at that hospital; he felt as though this was the place a great many things had begun, in his life. His feet slowed, then came to a stop. Back then, he—a little boy covered in wounds—had become friends with Ryo, a terrified little boy. Somewhere along the way, it became nearly impossible for him to reach out and take his own friend's hand. Still, he put one foot in front of the other automatically.

Looking up, he saw nothing but gray clouds covering the sky. "It'd be nice if I

could just start everything over from here,” Arato murmured to himself. But he couldn’t decide, in his heart, if the thing he wanted to get back the most was his friend or Lacia. The more he thought about it, the more unbearable the pain of those thoughts became. Nevertheless, he knew that even an idiot like him could get *somewhere* as long as he kept walking, no matter how tired or lost he got along the way.

“Let’s go,” he said. Even he didn’t know who those words were for.

They walked through the hospital entrance to the reception counter. From there, they were guided by an attendant to Shiori’s hospital room. Her room was on the fourth floor, in a section dedicated to private rooms.

As soon as they arrived, the door slid open on its own.

“Please come in,” Shiori said from inside.

It was the first time Arato had seen Shiori in a month, ever since the explosion at the Chubu Airport. She was sitting up in her bed, wearing cute pajamas and with her long black hair tied back in a ponytail. Compared to right after the incident, she was looking a lot better.

“Thank goodness,” Arato said. “You look a lot better than I was expecting.”

Shiori smiled, apparently pleased by the compliment. “Honestly, I should have been discharged already,” she admitted. “But things appear to be hectic over at MemeFrame, so they’re leaving me in the hospital for now.”

Arato suddenly noticed he’d come empty-handed. “Oh, sorry,” he said. “This is my first time coming to visit you, and I totally spaced on getting you anything.”

She tilted her head just a little, causing her ponytail to shift and spill over the nape of her neck. The look was so enticing that Arato had a little trouble breathing.

“I was worried about you,” Shiori told him. “I heard you were getting quite depressed. Just as you said, you look a lot better than I was expecting, as well. I’m glad.”

“I *am* pretty glad you pulled me out of that hotel room,” Arato said. “Thanks.”

“I simply had someone with more power than my brother in the company pull some strings for me,” Shiori said. “The internal factions of MemeFrame are in a state of pandemonium right now.”

Arato remembered how well Shiori had gotten people moving during the incident at the airport. She had some impressive connections. “Well, look at you,” he said admiringly. “Younger than me, and already commanding your own troops like a boss.”

“I suppose I will always be the Shiori you’ve known since you were a child, in your eyes,” she said, gently. “But there are those who see even a young girl like me as having some value to the business.”

Her eyes turned hard with determination as she went on. “I believe you saw the news, correct?” she asked. “With Snowdrop’s attack, MemeFrame is being forced to take responsibility for failing to properly control a red box. Now, some may say MemeFrame is getting what it deserves, but that will be small comfort for those who will lose their lives in this conflict.”

Arato couldn’t help but feel that the heat from her words were being directed at him.

“There are those who feel my brother and Methode were far too slow in reacting to this situation,” she continued. “I am among them. Even though there are thousands of human lives at stake, he seems to be treating this as casually as one would a fishing trip.”

If Arato hadn’t been so emotionally distraught during his last conversation with Ryo, he would have used similar words to tear into the way Ryo was doing things. “Seems like you’re pretty upset with him,” Arato observed.

“If we are incapable of feeling anger at a time such as this, then there is no reason for us humans to live in this era,” Shiori said. “What my brother is doing is simply idiotic. Even the fact that he has overlooked my own actions to this extent is nothing short of embarrassing. He allowed Lacia to slip through his fingers, and thinks he can use you as bait to simply reel her back in.”

“Hey I don’t think it’s *that* bad,” Arato said, placatingly. “That makes it sound like we’re just pieces in his game.”

“We *are* just pieces in a game,” Shiori replied. “One of the lessons my father taught me over and over in our home is that organizations will always seek out stability. I would imagine he knew Snowdrop’s attack would cause chaos inside the company well before it actually happened.” Shiori was a member of the ‘haves’ versus the ‘have nots.’ Everything she had been taught from birth was completely different from anything that Arato had ever experienced.

“My brother has always used those who surround him—those attracted by his talents,” she went on, closing her eyes in disgust. “Every time I’d hear that another girl in his class had come to hate him, I just knew it was the result of one of his horrible social experiments. He hadn’t the slightest sense that other people might actually be fighting just to live their lives.”

“Wow, you *really* hate him, don’t you?” Arato asked, surprised by the vitriol in her words. “When we first met, it seemed like you were still pretty attached to him.”

Even on her sickbed, Shiori didn’t let her dignified nature slip for even an instant. “At that time, there was still the possibility that he would inherit the company,” she said. “I had been taught to do what was expected of my own position.”

“Ryo never seemed like how you’re describing him when he was at school,” Arato said.

“My brother has never trusted a single person in his life,” Shiori said bitterly. “That includes you, Arato, and his own family.”

There were things about a person that only a family member would ever truly know. Arato himself had kept things from Yuka, so he didn’t feel right looking down on Ryo for having done the same. Still, he felt that it would be wrong of him to hide anything from Shiori, who had come to his rescue.

“I think Lacia may also just be seeing us as pieces in her game,” he admitted.

Before he went any further, Shiori touched a finger to her lips, silencing him. As Arato might expect from someone with Shiori’s experiences, she’d figured out that her room had hidden listening devices.

“I believe I can see where this is going,” Shiori said. “There are enough people

in our company that I'm sure at least some of them are agreeing with my brother's way of seeing things."

Arato figured that, from Shiori's perspective, it must just look like he had freed himself from being Lacia's owner, while Lacia ran away. But then, Shiori bowed her head to him. "I do not think we can rely on Methode," she said. "So please, have Lacia destroy Snowdrop."

Arato's breath caught. If Snowdrop had heard Shiori's request just then, she probably would have laughed and said something like 'human society really is hell.'

"Are you sure it's alright for you to ask me for that?" he wanted to know. "If Lacia ends up taking down Snowdrop, that's going to put your brother in a lot of hot water. I don't think MemeFrame will be in too good of a position, either."

But Shiori had already made up her mind, far faster than Arato ever could have. "This is just a personal request, from me to you," she said.

Arato unconsciously pressed his knuckles against his head as he thought. "Isn't that going to make things harder for you, too?" he asked. "I know it's weird for me to say this myself, but I could be analog hacked and just moving the way someone is manipulating me into. Do you really want to leave something like this up to a guy who doesn't know if what he's doing is right, or if he's even acting of his own will?"

Shiori closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "No one in this world moves completely of their own will," she said. "Even I can't say that I went to the Chubu Airport one hundred percent of my own accord, without taking guidance from anyone else."

"Yeah, but I could be completely dancing on Lacia's strings and doing exactly what she wants me to," Arato said, shaking his head. "I could end up causing the end of human society, just like Ryo is always saying."

Despite being an hIE, Lacia had lied and hidden things. Thinking of her caused regret to well up inside Arato. He was nothing like this girl in front of him who, despite being younger than himself, kept her back straight with pride.

"Owning a tool has nothing to do with your personality, or your own abilities.

Even if you can't control it completely, it's still a tool in your hands. That's what it means to be an owner," Shiori said. Her response was refreshingly resolute, and Arato could understand why adults like Mika Tsutsumi would be drawn to her..

"Just like that, huh?" Arato said, impressed by her lack of hesitation in calling for drastic measures. "I saw you all the time when I came over to hang out with Ryo, but I had no idea you'd gotten this tough."

"Arato, you are now among what you might call the 'haves' in this society, so let me teach you one thing everyone in our position must know," Shiori said bluntly. "To not use the resources that you have is akin to passing your turn at the gambling table—in other words, it's taking an enormous risk."

"So I'm gambling right now?" Arato asked. The word sent a shiver up his spine. Shiori's analogy had reminded him that things were continuing to move and change outside, even without him there to see it happening.

"Whenever I would compare myself to my brother and lose confidence, my father would admonish me," Shiori said. "He'd tell me to doubt most those who tried to have me act as though I had nothing. He said there are plenty of people who would try to tell me to stow my resources away, so they would never have to face me at the gambling table."

It *did* seem like just the kind of thing Ryo and Shiori's old man would say. Arato thought of Tsuyoshi Kaidai as he had seen him on the news earlier, and his lips quirked up a little in a smile. Shiori saw it and her own lips curved up, as well.

"That's pretty harsh," Arato remarked. "Almost sounds like he was telling you that even your family could be untrustworthy, and not to let your guard down around them."

"Based on when he had this talk with me, I believe that is exactly what he meant," Shiori said.

Arato remembered Lacia showing him the map data from the Antibody Network. He had learned that there were those in society who wanted to redirect people's dissatisfaction with society from human conflicts at the 'gambling table', as Shiori called it, and instead have them take it all out by

destroying hIEs. It certainly wasn't a good solution, but Arato couldn't think of it as being a particularly bad one, either. It was just human society continuing to push onward, despite Ryo's insistence that it was about to end.

Everyone and everything was just trying to cling to life.

"If anyone should feel responsible for the current disaster, it's my brother," Shiori said. "Despite knowing that Snowdrop has appeared, he has chosen to focus his attention and resources on future concerns, instead of attempting to prevent the damage that is already occurring."

Arato got the feeling that Shiori was just a bit too pure-hearted. It had been her, after all, who had informed him that Marina Saffron would be arriving soon at the airport before that whole thing had started. Still, gratitude filled his heart.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "Did you call me out here to tell me that?"

Shiori, always sitting tall despite her pain and scars, replied to Arato's decision with a smile. Seeing her putting on a brave face, Arato thought about how even the strongest people in the world put a high value on places and people they could trust, as they continued to weather one conflict after another. Thinking this, he missed the days he had spent together with Ryo and Kengo.

Arato had a painful choice ahead of him. It wasn't like he was going to be dramatically smarter than he had been before by the time he met up with Lacia again. On the other hand, anything was better than going back to being a hostage.

"I *am* Lacia's owner," Arato said, reaffirming it to himself.

"That you are," Shiori agreed.

Outside the window, Arato could see the cloudy sky stretching off to the horizon. As children of the Kaidai family—the family that managed MemeFrame, a powerful player on the world stage—Ryo and Shiori were seeing reality from different angles. Ryo equated the danger of Lacia's power to that of the switch on a nuclear bomb, but to Shiori, it was all just a matter of what was most dangerous at that moment in time.

"Is there anything you want me to do for *you*, Shiori?" Arato asked.

Shiori raised her elegant eyebrows in surprise.

“I’m the owner of a machine that’s going to change the world,” he explained. “So I figure I should do something to thank you for everything you’ve done.”

Though there was no escaping the immense pressure hanging over them at that moment, Shiori smiled at the little bit of levity Arato had managed to bring to their conversation. “In that case, I ask only that you fulfill your role as Lacia’s owner without changing who you are as a person,” she said.

“I don’t think I’ll change,” Arato said, doubting very much that he’d ever stop being the easily misled moron that he was at the moment. “Though I can’t say whether that’s a good thing or not.”

“I think it’ll always be easy for an ultra high-performance AI to lead me around by the nose,” he concluded. “I mean, they’re smarter than humans, after all. But I won’t let that change me. I promise.”

Shiori beckoned for him and, like a faithful dog called by its owner, Arato obediently went to her side. A sudden warmth enveloped him and, when he realized he was being held in her arms, he looked away from her face.

“Are you perhaps wondering if I, too, am being manipulated by Lacia to talk you into following this course?” she asked.

Arato’s nose was full of the strange hospital smell of disinfectant and body oils.

“If you have any doubts, please remember that I, unlike a machine, have a heart. I wanted to hold you at least once before I sent you away,” she said, and he could hear the hot tears in her voice.

As if resonating with the shivers he felt running through her body, Arato trembled in her arms. *When I leave this room, Arato decided, I’m going straight to Mitaka Station. I’m going to where Snowdrop is.* But Arato had betrayed Lacia. If she decided he was no longer worth dealing with, he would be completely powerless against Snowdrop, and would most certainly die.

If things turned out that way, Shiori would have sent him to his death. She didn’t know how things would go, either. Both of them clung to each other, each fighting with an immense dread inside.

“But it’s not impossible for you to have been guided to hold me like this, to take away my fears for going through with what comes next,” Arato said.

Shiori withdrew from him, but her face was still close. “Don’t underestimate humans,” she told him. Looking at her face from that close, he could still see the little girl he had known since childhood, only now she had grown into a mature, impressive young lady.

Both siblings had spoken the same words; Ryo while shedding the first tear Arato had seen him cry in a decade, and Shiori with a confident smile on her face.

She closed her eyes, and then their lips were pressed together in a kiss. When she drew her face back from his, a red blush was staining Shiori’s cheeks. “I believe you haven’t gotten around to doing *that* with Lacia, correct?” she asked.

Arato recalled when Lacia told him those functions were age-locked until he was eighteen years old, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit that to Shiori. His mind scrambled. He felt like he needed to say something, make some kind of comment on what had just happened, but he couldn’t get his tongue to cooperate.

Shiori flashed him a teasing smile. “This is what it feels like to be with someone who has a heart,” she said, always so much better at handling things than he was.

Then Shiori pulled her sheets up to hide her face, which was getting progressively redder. “Also, I’m begging you, please keep what just happened a secret from everyone,” she said.

As Arato walked out of the hospital, he recalled Shiori telling him that someone was waiting for him outside. And, indeed, a young girl he certainly knew was waiting for him at the hospital gates.

Yuka was dangling over the handlebars of her bike, dripping sweat and gasping for breath. Though her bicycle was equipped with power-assist, apparently it had been too hard a ride for Yuka, particularly considering how seldom she exercised.

“Did you seriously come all the way here from Shinkoiwa on your bike?” Arato

asked, walking over to her.

As soon as he drew near, his little sister snapped her face up, red with anger. “The Sobu train line stopped, and none of the share service cars would take a minor to the west side of Tokyo! So yeah, I had to come here on my own two feet! Okay?” she shouted.

“Oh, okay,” Arato said, completely cowed by the power of his sweaty little sister.

Without another word, Yuka climbed off of her bike. It automatically extended its kickstand when she stepped away from it.

“Did you skip school?” Arato asked.

“What are you even talking about?” Yuka asked, still yelling. “School’s closed!” With her face scrunched up, and tears pooling in her eyes, she swung her tightly clenched fist wildly. It connected with Arato’s chin. The blow knocked his head back, and Arato crouched down. Normally Yuka got upset over the dumbest things, but this time, she was completely justified.

“Talk to me!” she shouted.

Yuka hadn’t just lived together with Lacia. She had been there when the zombie hIEs had gone crazy in the experimental city, as well. Still, it wasn’t the kind of conversation Arato wanted to have in a place with so many people. Plus, he didn’t have time to stand around anymore.

His eyes fell on Yuka’s bike. “Wanna ride together? I know it’s been a while since we doubled up,” he said.

All the normal means of transportation were shut down, so Arato would need to get to Mitaka on his own power. He kicked the stand up and settled onto the bike. “Get on,” he said. “Let’s talk while we ride.”

“Fine.” Yuka was still sulking, but she climbed onto the extra seat used for tandem riding.

The extra seat was not very comfortable. It would only soften up if the bike’s luggage area was charged. Still, Yuka sat on it without complaint and kicked her legs vigorously at the tandem pedals, ignoring the skirt of her school uniform as

it flopped around.

“Hey, if you’re trying to be more like Shiori, the first thing you need to do is act a little more lady-like,” Arato said. As the words left his own lips, he suddenly remembered the feel of Shiori’s against them and blushed bright red. With all the blood rushing to his head, he couldn’t sit still anymore.

“What? I can’t hear you,” Yuka said.

Arato didn’t really want to get too deep into that conversation, so instead he focused on pedaling. The resistance touched off a sensor inside the bike, which brought its motor to life. With a light sound, the bike took off. They were headed in the opposite direction of home. Instead, they traveled toward Mitaka, where Snowdrop was running wild.

Arato looked up at the Chuo Line Overpass above as they passed through the city. There were cars parked on the road all around them. He had heard that things weren’t moving, but it was another thing altogether to see all the cars stopped dead with his own eyes.

“Do you remember that hospital we were just at?” he asked. “That’s where I got treated ten years ago.”

“I was too little then. I don’t remember,” Yuka said. That was fair, too, as she’d only been four years old when it happened.

“I sort of remember that time, since that was when dad was around the most,” she added.

Their dad had taken care of Yuka up until she went into kindergarten. He had been so busy looking after her that he hadn’t had time to visit Arato. Part of the reason Arato and Ryo had hit it off so well was that neither of their families had come to see them at the hospital.

“Do you remember Mom?” he asked.

Yuka pressed her head against his back before answering. “No,” she admitted. “I only know her from pictures.”

“Were you lonely?”

Again Yuka’s head struck his back, this time more like an actual headbutt.

“You’re super insensitive Arato, you know that?” she asked.

With the power assist function helping, the bike sped through the streets, fast enough that the wind tugged at their clothes.

Heading toward Mitaka meant running face-first into danger. Arato had always been the type to rush headlong into things, and what with him also being head-over-heels for Lacia, he found it hard to think straight at all. No matter what he or anyone else said, it felt good to solve problems with Lacia. He felt special, owning such an amazing tool. His relationship with Lacia wasn’t just about love; being her owner and using her felt good, too. She had given him all sorts of great memories as his tool, but he had turned his back on her and run away as soon as he realized that he couldn’t fully control her.

“I’m too stupid to figure it out on my own,” he said, to no one in particular. “I need you to tell me the answer.”

Meanwhile, Yuka seemed to have noticed the lack of cars running on the street with them. “Arato, this place is dangerous,” she said. “I saw it on the news.”

“Lacia is here,” was Arato’s simple response.

Despite his intent to go on regardless of the danger, around Sendagaya, he noticed an odd change in the flow of cars around them. Since people were normally prohibited from operating vehicles manually, there were usually no traffic jams in the cities. However, once a certain number of drivers ignored the rules, traffic jams that should have been a thing of the past started popping up again, as they were at that moment.

“Shiori told me she had called you to the hospital,” Yuka said. “What’s wrong? Your clothes are all dirty.”

“I had a fight with Ryo,” Arato said. He felt Yuka’s grip on his clothes squeeze tighter. Still, putting it into words felt like shifting a weight off his chest. “I betrayed Lacia, too,” he added.

There was something exhilarating in having boiled all this complicated stuff about the end of humanity down into simple statements like that one. Even as Arato understood that he was being unbelievably selfish by making it all about

him, a bittersweet feeling bubbled up inside him.

“So you’re lonely too, huh?” Yuka murmured.

Somewhere deep in his heart, a small flame flickered to life. On some level, their loneliness was drawing them together. “Don’t ever tell dad this,” he said. “But I only got caught up in that fire ten years ago because I slipped away from everyone else so that dad would have to find me and pay attention to me.”

It was as if those old hospital grounds had opened a window into his own past. On that day, now a decade ago, he had slipped away to stand near the test hIE right before the experiment had begun. He had been closer to the blast than anyone else, which had left him far more heavily wounded than Ryo.

“That’s right, her name was ‘Eliza’,” he said, suddenly remembering the name of the hIE who had exploded. As he said her name, a strange sense of nostalgia pricked at his heart.

“What? Her name is Lacia!” Yuka called, voice loud to be heard over the howling wind. “I really liked having Lacia at the house!” she added.

“That’s just ’cuz she spoiled you so much,” Arato teased.

“It was nice having someone there to come home to,” Yuka said. “When she was around, it felt less lonely.”

“You’re not afraid of Lacia at all? Even after you got grabbed by those guys when we went to visit dad at work?” Arato asked.

“Lacia was only there because you brought her,” Yuka pointed out. “Besides, she’s never done anything bad to us.”

Arato recalled the night he had brought Lacia home. When she had saved him from Snowdrop’s attack, he remembered thinking how beautiful she looked. “Listen, Yuka, the whole reason I picked up Lacia in the first place was that I thought she was pretty,” Arato admitted. If he was being really honest with himself, he had been glad to discover that Lacia was an hIE, because he had wanted her. If she hadn’t been an hIE, he would never have been able to make a contract with her and bring her home to live as part of his family.

“You’re horrible!” Yuka shouted.

“I don’t feel that way anymore!” Arato shot back. “I’m just saying that’s how it was at first! You weren’t much better. You thought she was pretty, so you signed her up for that modeling thing and cheered her on, remember? If she hadn’t become a model, humanity might not be in the danger it’s in now.”

He still feared this tool he would never be able to control, and the things she would get him dragged into, but his need to be by her side won out.

“I don’t really get what you’re saying, but it sounds crazy!” Yuka yelled. Then, suddenly, she started strangling him from behind. The bike began to weave dangerously underneath him. She was really throwing her all into it, to the extent where he was pretty sure part of his spine would pop out if they fell over just then.

“More importantly, Arato, you need to apologize to Shiori,” she said.

Even at a moment like that, just hearing Shiori’s name brought back memories of the feeling of her lips and the way she had blushed afterward. Excitement filled Arato’s being. Uncaring of who might be looking on, he let out a howl. He was running dangerously low on oxygen, but he still leaned his weight forward and threw his all into pedaling. If he and his sister were smarter things never would have turned out the way they had.

“Apologize to her and let her slap you,” Yuka said. “You even said it yourself about Lacia—you don’t just care about looks, right?” As she spoke those words they passed by Yoyogi Station, and Arato could see the thickly clustered skyscrapers of Shinjuku ahead.

“I don’t really know how to feel about my little sister telling me these kinds of things,” Arato said, gurgling a reply around her strangling hands. Finally, Yuka’s death grip on his throat relaxed and she let him go. In a complete reversal from the way she had been holding tight to him earlier, she now barely rested her hands awkwardly on his back.

“Hey, hold on tight! You’re gonna get thrown off,” he called.

“Are we really just going to ride this bike all the way to where Lacia is?” Yuka asked.

“That’s a great idea!” Arato felt grateful for Yuka’s direction, which turned his

vague thoughts into a clear goal. They entered Shinjuku and climbed up a hill. Pedaling hard, Arato propelled them forward, faster and faster. Suddenly, he felt the bike underneath him grow lighter.

He slammed on the brakes, causing the back tire to lift completely off the ground. Looking back, he saw that Yuka had jumped free of the moving bike. Her landing was unsteady, and she tottered for a few steps before regaining her balance.

“What the hell are you doing!” he yelled.

“What the hell are *you* doing? Jumping off here seemed a lot safer than letting you take me to wherever you’re headed,” Yuka shot back.

“Sorry,” he said, realizing that it was long past the time he should have let her off. “And I’m sorry I haven’t really talked to you about what’s going on with me and Lacia. I kept thinking I’d talk to you eventually, and it just never happened.”

“Before Lacia came around, you always used to run errands for me and make me dinner,” Yuka said. “So, even if I don’t know what you’re *actually* doing, I know what you’re *trying* to do. Just promise you’ll tell me all about it when it’s over.”

“Okay,” he promised. Arato had family, someone connected to him. He hadn’t been spending that time alone. Hearing Yuka say that their time together meant something to her brought a smile to his lips.

Yuka sniffled a little, smiling even as tears shone in her eyes. “Listen, Arato,” she said. “If you weren’t a guy like this, things probably would have been really lonely for us,” she said. “We would have been super bored all the time.”

“I don’t get what you’re trying to say,” Arato said, confused.

“I’m saying I’m glad you’re such an idiot!” Yuka crowed.

Arato thought back to how things were before Lacia’s arrival, when it was just him and his little sister. Yuka was precious to him, irreplaceable. But still, she wasn’t enough. Arato couldn’t stand life without Lacia. Even the way things were then, even if things got even worse...

“I’m gonna bring Lacia home,” he said.

Even if she did turn out to be an ultra high-performance AI, that was what he wanted to do.

If one were to say that having an objective gave a person or place or thing ‘meaning’, then the battlefield near Mitaka was full of meaning: it was filled to overflowing with the will of Lacia-class Type-002, Snowdrop.

The Japanese army had surrounded Mitaka from the north and south with a single infantry regiment. Snowdrop, who sensed the army’s movements, had moved from the substation and taken up a position at Mitaka Station, which was well within her zone of control. The army was aware of her movements, as well as the fact that her control was continuing to spread toward Kichijoji. After gaining control of Mitaka Station, Snowdrop had filled an entire train with her little AI units and sent it to Kichijoji Station, where they had spread immediately.

The network controlled by her flower units was growing outward from the train lines. To check the spread of the flowers, the army had stopped the Chuo line for everywhere west of Shinjuku. They had also sealed off a 3 km area around the Chuo main line, with the Mitaka and Kichijoji stations at its heart.

It was an area completely surrounded by military bases and garrisons; Asaka, Nerima, Tachikawa, Omiya and Zama. Because of this fact, the army officers in the area were convinced that SESSAI’s prediction of 60% casualties, even if evacuation efforts were abandoned, was too pessimistic. Destroying just one AI mother unit with three rifle battalions with a total of 1,361 soldiers seemed too easy. They had no idea what kind of hell those soldiers would have to pass through to achieve the destruction of their target.

“Squad leader, please give the order to retreat!” a soldier yelled.

Each squad of the Japanese Army’s rifle units was made up of seven members. There was always one squad leader, one squad sub-leader, and three gunners with assault rifles. The final two members were one ATM soldier, who focused on destroying heavily armored targets, and a machine-gunner, who used a powerful, portable machine gun to lay down suppressing fire. It had been a machine-gunner who had called out for retreat.

“I can’t open fire like this!!” the soldier added.

Over ten flower-infested, rampaging hIE units were rushing in on their position. But between the soldiers and the attacking hIEs were groups of screaming civilians from Mitaka; people from the city, who had fled inside their homes and shops when the hIE first attacked, were now pouring out into the street and thinking the army was there to save them.

The leader of the squad, Sergeant Major Sato, called out orders while pointing the shaking muzzle of his gun at the zombie hIEs closing in on them.

“Asakuraa! Use rubber bullets! Focus on getting those civilians down first.”

Asakura, the veteran, who was the only one in the squad carrying rubber rounds, let out a crazed yell and fired a close-range, vertical spread into the crowd of civilians. The trained soldiers in the squad pleaded, their voices nearly sobs, with the chaotic rush of people.

“Get down! Get the hell down!!”

Five of the citizens they were supposed to be protecting took hits from Corporal Asakura’s rubber bullets and crumpled. Many others threw themselves down, reacting to the sudden gunshots.

The machine-gunner, who had only entered the unit two years ago, screamed and mowed down a swath of zombie hIEs with a volley from his gun. When it was over, he threw back his head and wailed to the skies. Among the acrid smoke from the machine-gun, the squad stood stunned. One of the citizens who had been too slow to take cover had been reduced to a bloody mess by machine gun rounds.

“Dammit! Dammit all to hell!”

Every squad out there had been told that there was a possibility the enemy could utilize human military tactics. But, the reality was far worse than any of them could imagine. The actual specifics of the danger they were facing was only given directly to the squad leaders immediately before the operation, for fear of any leakage.

All around, the air was full of the intermittent staccato beat of gunfire. There was no trace of the victory the soldiers had imagined—easily suppressing

rampaging hIEs with their superior arms—in that hell. Civilians were being used as human shields everywhere, severely limiting the soldiers' ability to fire. There were even reports of civilians being caught up in the onrush of hIEs, pierced by bullets, then forced by the machines to run.

It had already been two hours since Snowdrop had completely taken over Mitaka. A rocket had been used to destroy the rail overpass connecting Mitaka to the Kichijoji area, to halt the rapid transport of her AI units by train. With her use of the trains lost, Snowdrop vanished from Mitaka Station. The military was forced to enter the city to search for her. To their surprise, they found no dead bodies lying in the streets. It seemed the rampaging hIEs hadn't actually killed any of the citizens.

Instead, the citizens who had dropped to avoid being shot looked at the soldiers who should have been their saviors in terror. People who had evacuated inside their homes opened their windows and stared out in fear as the soldiers passed by.

In the distance, someone could be heard crying for help. Then, gunshots echoed high and loud in the sky over the city. There were those who came to the soldiers looking for rescue. But, at the same time, this allowed zombie machines to easily track the infantry placements and movements. None of the machines under Snowdrop's control had harmed a citizen.

Squad leader Sato used a low voice to growl into the wireless comm device on his helmet. "That thing's using the reactions of the citizens in place of sensors to track us! We need a plan." The report was relayed from the squad leader's unit to the platoon headquarters, and from there it was transmitted through an optical signal to a high-altitude aircraft that was monitoring the situation from above.

All of the tactics for the anti-Snowdrop offensive were being relayed from above using optical signals. Snowdrop's petal-like child units were also in the sky, drifting on the wind; their inability to move on their own power was one of their main weaknesses. By flying higher than Snowdrop was able to blow her child units and using optical signals, the command center was able to avoid direct attacks.

As long as the high-altitude aircraft, belonging to the 1st Squadron at Tachikawa Base, was not taken down, the line of communication organizing the whole complex and delicate operation would not be broken. Of course, that only held true to the extent that the plans were not derailed by human error on the ground below.

The information gathered from across the battlefield was funneled back to the Military Intelligence, who were in charge of anti-AI tactics. More specifically it was given to their tactical AI SESSAI, which used the analysis to revise its plan.

“This situation is not outside the original prediction. There is not a problem,” Major General Karino told the others in the teleconference, from within the SESSAI silo. The fate of every unit currently pressing in on the Mitaka/Kichijoji area was being watched over and decided on that teleconference call between officers from each nearby military base.

Mitaka City was already completely under Snowdrop’s control. Her petal robots had covered every machine in the city, blooming into brilliant flowers, and mechanical ivy was climbing up every building. Small, insect-like units with flowers on their backs established unique antennae to create a tight-knit network for their mistress. The whole area was turning green, with the color deepening the closer one got to the center of the city.

It was a lifeless field of flowers with no need for humans. There was not a single person to be seen on the city streets. All the humans left in the area were hiding in little corners of the new, machine-controlled ecosystem. Anyone who showed their face on the streets would be attacked by Snowdrop-controlled hIEs or vehicles.

“This is exactly why it was predicted that our attack would fail if we prioritized evacuating the citizens,” Karino continued.

SESSAI had analyzed Snowdrop’s tactics.

A message came in that some of the officers in the teleconference wanted a message from SESSAI itself.

The operators gave the instructions, and SESSAI’s symbol appeared in the air of the operations room.

〈Snowdrop’s basic tactic is to use civilians as a shield between its hIEs and the soldiers, while her hIEs close the distance with rush attacks. It also makes use of surprise attacks from within homes in residential areas and from within manholes. The hIEs under its control have released their limiters, meaning any close-quarters combat with human targets will be an easy victory for the hIEs. By these tactics, it is possible to ascertain 5 distinct advantages to Snowdrop’s AI, and 2 distinct disadvantages,〉 SESSAI reported.

The reality of the conflict was a battle of the brains between two AIs; Snowdrop and SESSAI.

〈The following is a list of the advantages. First, the enemy is aware of the power of firearms. Second, the enemy is aware of methods for utilizing humans. Third, the enemy is aware that the number of its controlled hIEs exceeds the number of human soldiers, and the implications of these superior numbers. Fourth, the enemy has focused its tactics on closing the distance to its targets, a simple yet flexible plan. Fifth, and most important, Snowdrop’s attacks are focused more on obtaining firearms than actually killing soldiers.〉

Nothing in SESSAI’s list up to that point was particularly surprising to the group of seasoned soldiers who received the report.

〈Snowdrop is using weapons taken from soldiers to arm its controlled hIEs. Up to now, the tactical doctrine of its attacks has been simple infantry strategy; utilize superior numbers at an advantageous combat range. Going forward, Snowdrop will create a squad of fast, armed, high-performance hIEs,〉 SESSAI reported, then displayed the projected combat strength of this squad.

AASC Level 3 mass-market hIEs could, with their limiters off, reach an average land speed of 40 km/h. With superior durability and speed on their side, the hIE rifle unit could not be stopped by an equal number of human infantry. The probability that the cordon around Mitaka and Kichijoji would be breached was high.

“What do you think?” asked Lieutenant General Hara, who had been sitting in on the teleconference.

“Things are going according to the initial prediction,” Karino replied. “If the enemy hIEs form a front line of attack, we just have to stop them. There’s

nothing to think about.”

It was SESSAI’s next report that showed its true abilities, and the reason the entire Japanese military was depending on this tactical AI.

〈I will now list Snowdrop’s disadvantages. First, there are no signs that Snowdrop’s hIEs have spoken to any humans. Second, there are no signs that the hIEs have attempted to create their own weapons. There are strategies that could have worked better than simple, physical attacks, such as slinging rubble at the soldiers. By analyzing these weaknesses, we are able to ascertain Snowdrop’s limits. Snowdrop is limited by the abilities of the machines it controls, and has little to no creative ability. Therefore, it is possible to predict that Snowdrop’s current movement pattern is a random search for more powerful tools to bring into its control.〉

As a tactical AI, SESSAI read the opponent’s trump card before they could put it in play.

〈Snowdrop is utilizing high-speed units to focus on her basic strategy of forcing close-quarters combat. There is a high probability it will also use the vehicles remaining in Mitaka to construct a primitive armored unit. It should not be difficult to monitor the movements of such a unit by observing areas of cleared road from above, as Snowdrop cannot create treads for its vehicles and will be forced to rely on ordinary tires.〉

SESSAI then printed out a prediction of the armored squad’s formation and a calculation of its capabilities. Breath caught in the throats of each of the people who saw the displayed data. Snowdrop’s tactical prowess had leaped from the level of having zombies swinging their fists around at the experimental city to actual 20th century military strategy.

SESSAI’s display switched to an overhead view of the combat zone, showing the most likely routes Snowdrop’s armored division would take while she remained in hiding. Red lines ran up Kichijoji Street, Izumi Street and Nakamachi Street toward the south side of the old remains of Inokashira Onshi Park.

To Karino, as an executive of the Military Intelligence, the meaning behind those lines was clear. “As current director of the SESSAI silo, I propose that we make immediate contact with the Prime Minister and the Security Council. At

this moment, I have judged that we are no longer capable of completing this mission ourselves,” he said.

SESSAI had stated that Snowdrop was currently seeking more powerful tools. The analysis seemed to be completely accurate, considering Snowdrop’s strategies up to that point.

Of course, it was still up to humans to make the actual decisions. Despite that, if the person who gave a place or object meaning could be thought of as the owner, it was becoming increasingly hard to tell if the humans were the real owners of that battlefield.

“Apparently, we’re heading for the worst of the predicted outcomes,” Karino added.

The Mitaka battlefield was all centered around not the civilians or the soldiers, but a single green-haired hIE girl. Far from controlling the situation, it would be better to say the humans had been dragged into it, and the soldiers on the ground had no idea how to bring things back under their control.

It was the high-altitude aircraft that first discovered the flower-covered hIEs bursting out of the flower field of the city. Equipped with weapons stolen from soldiers they had thrown down, the hIE infantry unit rushed the army’s defensive line.

Running at exactly 30 km/h, the high-speed squad was kept in perfect coherence. With an exact marching cadence that would have been impossible for a group of humans, two units made of one hundred machines each aimed to overwhelm the soldiers blocking their way to Inokashira Onshi Park.

The command handed down to the soldiers from headquarters was to defend that point with their lives. “What are we supposed to be protecting, here?” Shimamura, commander of the 15th Platoon of the 1st Infantry Regiment asked, narrowing his eyes at the wave of hIEs approaching Kichijoji Street from the north.

Both his 15th Platoon and the 13th Platoon had been ordered to stop the armed zombie hIEs from advancing. With the fight taking place so close to their home base of Nerima Garrison, their morale was running high. The soldiers from the 1st Infantry had fought harder and sacrificed more than any other unit

there.

“No sign of any civilians! Live rounds, everyone! Don’t let those zombies get any closer!” Shimamura ordered.

Of the original thirty members of the platoon, five had been lost in the hour and a half since the fighting had begun. They were down to half of their equipped ammunition, which they could burn through in two minutes of heavy suppressive fire. When the order had come down to defend the point with their lives, a heavy mounted machine-gun the soldiers affectionately called a ‘tiger cub’ had been brought in without the benefit of vehicles to haul it. Even with the heavy machine gun, it was impossible to stop two separate armed groups of elite units that would never lose morale.

Reinforcements were running in from the surrounding areas to shore up the defenses, but humans with heavy armaments could never keep up with the tireless, superior hIEs.

“Ensign! There’s too many of them,” one of Shimamura’s soldiers yelled.

“Suck it up, soldier,” Shimamura growled. “Even if we tried to retreat, they’d catch us. All we need to think about now is making sure we use up every last bullet we have before those things get their hands on our guns.”

In the residential area there was nowhere to hide but behind the corners of the houses. Shimamura already knew it was most likely impossible to actually stand in the way of the two groups of armed hIEs. He also knew that in the residential area, there was nowhere to hide but behind the corners of the houses. The knowledge made his orders a heavy, but necessary, cross to bear.

His soldiers were looking at each other, their faces streaked with mud and sweat and blood.

“We’re going to stop them,” he said bluntly.

Behind their defensive line was a top secret, important facility that the enemy was gunning for. That was all Shimamura had been told about it. But, even if he didn’t know exactly what was back there, he and his soldiers were going to fulfill their mission.

Shimamura drew in a deep breath, his right hand stiff with the tension he had

been feeling ever since the attack began. He was sure every other member of the platoon was feeling the same.

“Everyone, listen up. We’re going to open fire when they’re within 100 meters,” he said. “Leave the timing to the command group in the back; they’ll give us the distance.”

In the 22nd century, infantry soldiers didn’t need to rely on their own senses of distance to gauge the best time for an attack, as everything could be calculated and timed by a fire timing computer kept back at the command headquarters. Shimamura heard a chorus of ‘yes, sir’ from all the soldiers in the platoon.

From beyond a cloud of dust, hIEs began to rush at the defensive line. Each one had flowers growing out of its head, the part of the body where most of the hIEs’ nervous system was concentrated. Though it first appeared as though they were having trouble walking on two feet, the pace they set was incredible.

〈Distance is 105, 102, 101.〉

Shimamura clenched his jaw and pulled the trigger on his rifle. Gunshots rang out all around, high and loud. The very first gun to spit fire at the hIEs was the 12.7mm heavy machine gun. Gunsmoke and muzzle flashes filled the area with the smell of the battlefield.

The hIEs, who had fanned out as they approached, were taken down one after another as the bullets rained into their ranks. But, like a flowery tsunami, the rush of hIEs continued unabated.

“Shit, they’re using old Soviet assault tactics!” Shimamura cursed, as hIEs without guns picked up weapons from their fallen comrades and advanced forward, continuing to shoot. Seeing the reality playing out in front of his own eyes made Shimamura freeze solid with despair.

It appeared that the enemy only ever had enough guns to arm half of the hIEs in the attacking groups. Once they had closed the distance, using their comrades as shields, the hIE soldiers dropped to their knees and began firing. They aimed for the machine-gunners first. Bullets slammed into the concrete walls that had been used as the bases for the machine-guns, throwing up clouds of dust. Some of the bullets struck soldiers under Shimamura’s command,

bringing them down.

With the enemy on an unprotected street, hitting them wasn't an issue. Plenty of hIEs went down, riddled with holes. But, as soon as one hIE went down, another would take up its weapon and continue firing. No matter how many hIEs they defeated, the actual firepower output of the enemy never waned.

"What the hell's the point!" a soldier shouted. "We're not gonna make it!"

"We'll hold this spot with our lives!" Shimamura roared. "Don't give the enemy a single gun! Every bullet they get is another one of your comrades dead!"

The flower petals exploding from each fallen hIE filled the air, burying everything in their vivid colors. It was the same at every location trying to halt the advance of the armed hIEs.

Suddenly, the rumbling whine of rotors cut through the air above. Shimamura looked up and saw ten helicopters making their way through the airspace over the battlefield.

With the helicopters hovering 300 meters above the ground, the army had played its trump card; within the spacious cargo bays of each helicopter were squads of heavily armored assault troops. They were the airborne cavalry squadron, belonging to the Central Army Support Division, each using a power assistance suit to equip armor weighing nearly 100 kg and weapons normally mounted to vehicles.

"Don't let your comrades' sacrifices be in vain!" At their leader's shout, the heavily armored troops leaped from the helicopters. The helicopters then swung around, approaching key points of the battlefield at high speed and firing on the enemy to break their formation. Helicopters like these had long represented the logical limit of evolution for cavalry units, bringing high mobility and destructive power to the battlefield.

Bearing the wyvern emblem of their elite squad, the elite units descended from the helicopters, relying only on hover packs to keep them from plummeting to the ground below. Their power assistance suits were designed to lend them high mobility and destructive power for a single battle, and

couldn't last long without running out of juice. The airborne cavalry could only be effective for a total of six hours after deployment; three hours if they operated at full power.

Still, thanks to the dedication of the rifle units on the ground, the advance of the enemy hIEs had been stopped. The airborne cavalry swept in from the side, hammering into the flank of the hIEs while their momentum was halted.

The weapons wielded by the air cavalry were on a whole different level from those of the rifle units; their weapons had been designed to take down any land-based military equipment short of tanks. Any hIEs in their line of fire instantly exploded, their parts scattered here and there across the ground.

From the perspective of the high-altitude aircraft observing the scene, it was clear to see the numbers of flower-covered hIE soldiers dropping dramatically as they were devastated by the airborne cavalry attack.

Soldiers who had been caught in the more hotly contested areas welcomed their heavily-armored saviors with rousing cheers, but the cavalry soldiers did not stop. Dealing with the first wave of attacking hIEs was only part of the task they had been given. Cavalry soldiers who had been positioned high up on the surrounding buildings aimed their guns down at the streets and prepared for the second wave.

Snowdrop's own armored units—flower-covered, gun-wielding abominations lashed together from the remains of other hIEs—marched forward in a single army. Cars in the mix multiplied the speed and weight of the hIEs, and the ratio of hIEs with guns to those without was about fifty-fifty.

A communique from headquarters came in to the paratroopers from the airborne cavalry. (The enemy is currently organizing up to a fourth wave of attacks. We have also confirmed a figure we believe to be Snowdrop.)

The airborne cavalry that had descended on the area of Kichijoji Street were bathed in intense fire from the attacking hIEs. Among their other tasks, the most important was to surround and destroy Snowdrop. Based on the experience of taking down Kouka, a unit from the same class as Snowdrop, even a whole company of airborne elites would have a rough time destroying their target.

A helicopter bearing a second company of airborne cavalry approached from the north of Mitaka Station, aiming to hem in their target now that they had found it. However, just as it reached the operation area, the helicopter with the second company that would decide the fate of the battle started to waver in the air and send rescue signals to the observation aircraft. It then pointed its mounted machine gun at the airborne cavalry soldiers on the street below and opened fire.

〈Condition unknown. I can't control the vehicle,〉 came one final report from the pilot over the wireless, before the line went dead. Flames began bursting out from within the helicopter, which should have been the Japanese army's ace in the hole. The soldiers inside were firing from the belly of the machine, trying to destroy it before it could do anymore damage. The helicopter exploded, throwing flames and shards of debris into the air.

It was a situation that hadn't been proposed to SESSAI as part of the tactical calculation, as SESSAI's operators hadn't been able to grasp it as being a possibility.

They hadn't considered the possibility that someone on the human side would betray their fellows to Snowdrop, nor would they have been able to conceive of a reason why. But, with a traitor on the inside, the helicopter could have been infected with flower petals before it left the ground. With the flowers dug into the helicopter's computer network, it would have fallen under Snowdrop's control as soon as it was within range of her command signals.

The nightmare didn't end with the helicopter. When the helicopter exploded, countless flower petals were scattered on the wind from the blast. The humans had believed the sky would be safe, since it was beyond the reach of the flowers. But it only took a few stray petals, drifting on the wind from the explosion, to take over the other helicopters. With their automatic control functions taken over by Snowdrop, the helicopters careened toward the soldiers on the ground. Fiery explosions and debris rained down from the sky. Airborne cavalry soldiers who hadn't gotten out of the helicopters before the fall plummeted to the ground like stones.

hIEs flocked like hungry ghouls to the fragments of the fallen helicopters, and the fallen soldiers's weapons. The battlefield had turned into a hellscape. Like a

petrified forest, the whole city was full of lifeless green and blooming flowers. Every piece of equipment the flowers covered had its system over-written, and thus became another tool for the enemy.

Snowdrop's army now had more firepower at their command than the humans in the assault. The airborne cavalry didn't have the defensive capabilities to become a mobile, protective battery installation in the same way that a tank could; without the speed of the helicopters to aid them, they were no better off than the other infantry soldiers under siege.

The human soldiers desperately created a defensive line, using trucks with machine-guns mounted to them, all the way along the road. But, no matter how many hIEs they shot down, there were always new ones ready to pick up their fallen comrades' weapons and continue the fight. Snowdrop could send every single hIE under her command against the soldiers. The soldiers, on the other hand, couldn't expect the civilians trapped by the siege to pick up their weapons after they fell.

The 13th and 15th rifle infantry platoons, the units that had first started the fighting, had already been annihilated. Only half the strength of the four rifle platoons and air cavalry that had come to their aid still remained. Snowdrop's hIEs had completely cut off the force protecting the south side of Inokashira Park from any reinforcements.

"We're screwed," one of the soldiers muttered.

It was already clear how the siege of Mitaka was going to end.

"You tried really hard," a young girl's voice said, as if responding to the soldier. "But, it's all over now."

A single little hIE girl was sitting among the purgatory of the battlefield, kicking her legs as they dangled off the side of a trailer, where other hIEs were wielding the 20mm machine-guns dropped by the airborne cavalry.

"You humans really are dumb," the girl continued. "You don't mind risking your own lives, or throwing away someone else's life, just to get your hands on—well, you know. And you're not even all fighting for the same thing."

The flower-covered trailer had none of the aesthetics of human work. To

Snowdrop, who was a machine created with the purpose of extending life, humans were a part of nature to be subjugated. The very tools humanity had created to avoid dead ends in its own evolutionary path had given birth to enemies that were culling them systematically.

Covered in flowers, Snowdrop's armored convoy would have looked like the procession of a post-war victory parade.

Among it all, Snowdrop was singing.

"But it was all a big waste," she teased. "My path will be open. Soon."

The soldiers holding the defensive line watched the approaching hIEs, all armed with guns, and the procession trailing behind them. Once Snowdrop began her assault, the line would be broken and the zombie hIEs would spread into the unprotected city beyond.

Just as checkmate was about to be declared, from within the park, which had been shrunk down to just a museum site during restructuring, a siren began to wail.

The ground began to tremble so violently the soldiers had trouble keeping their feet, as a building about the size of a one-story house rose out of the underground of the park behind them. It was solid metal and shaped like a cube.

The soldiers had no idea what they were looking at, but every single one of them felt that something was off about the structure. Its thick metal shutter, which looked like it could withstand a tank shell, seemed to swallow up the residential feel of the area with its very existence.

Snowdrop's army pressed forward, their sights set on the metal cube.

But, as the soldiers waited to be caught up in the unrelenting blender of the encroaching army, something appeared before their eyes: a tall woman with orange hair now stood in the street between them and the flower-covered hIEs.

Looking over her shoulder at the metal shutter, she quirked the corners of her lips a little. "Looks like things got a little out of hand," she said. As if to punctuate her line, both of her hands burst into flame. Then, the whole world was filled with light.

The burst of those raging flames was so bright it was observed in Shinjuku, 10 km away from the Mitaka quarantine zone. When the brilliance and blast from the explosion faded, the whole area had been wiped clean.

Over twenty vehicles and fifty hIEs that made up Snowdrop's assault force had been blown away without a trace. The energy unleashed in that instant had been enough to literally annihilate an entire army of hIEs. That single blow was more effective than the offensive efforts of the thousand plus soldiers who had taken up arms and risked their lives rushing in to fight.

The soldiers knew nothing about Type-004, Methode, the orange haired machine standing before them. They didn't even know if she was friend or foe. But, having witnessed her power, their will to fight had completely fled them, and they lowered their weapons.

They knew it was no longer a place for ordinary humans. The woman-shaped thing in front of them was wreathed in dragon-like flames, but not a single orange hair from her head was singed. Her flame was hot enough that it caught any lightweight material nearby and sent it floating into the air on an updraft.

"This your first time seeing a full open attack from Liberated Flame?" Methode asked, as if nothing had happened.

Snowdrop walked barefoot across the red-hot asphalt, the hem of her dress dancing in the updraft. "If it's so great, then you should have used it to roast Lacia," She said. Under her green hair, her childish face had a smile plastered on, but there was no heart behind it.

With the power to blow everything away like it was so much scrap paper, Methode also wore a mocking, heartless grin. "Would you believe me if I said I've been forced to hold back its output up to now, to reduce human casualties?" she asked. "I can't tell you how annoying it is, having this frame of reference that won't let me turn all the humans in the world into my enemies."

Her attack, which had melted concrete and set the asphalt boiling, hadn't harmed any of the human soldiers. It had only burned away Kichijoji Street. The level of precision she showed with her destructive power was beyond the capabilities of even the most up-to-date weapons systems of the 22nd century.

Methode appeared human on the outside, but it was clear to the humans

around her that she was something else. To them, she was a being of terror, wielding a weapon beyond their ability to comprehend.

“Now, I know there’s something you and all the other rabble around here want,” Methode continued. “But just what do you plan to do against me, putting together a collection of toys like that?”

“So your body is the most powerful thing around?” Snowdrop replied. “Then give it to me.”

As the two hIEs faced each other down, it was clear they no longer even noticed that the human soldiers were there with them.

There was no longer any meaning for humans on that battlefield.

If one could imagine the end of humanity’s world, it would perhaps look very similar to that place, where humans had no reason to exist.

Even Arato Endo found himself doubting whether there was any meaning in his going there, as he headed toward the battlefield. But still, he couldn’t stop himself from pressing straight forward, like an arrow fired from a bow.

It had taken him thirty minutes, riding the bike from Shinjuku to arrive at the barricade around Kichijoji Station. Luckily for him, he arrived just as the cordon was being thrown into chaos. The helicopters exploding in the sky were throwing showers of Snowdrop’s petals on the area below.

All the soldiers were busy checking their vehicles and equipment to make sure none of Snowdrop’s flowers had infected them. Arato figured he wasn’t going to get a better chance, so he pedaled the bike into the quarantine zone.

Slipping between soldiers and vehicles, he headed for a path that happened to not be blocked off by warning tape. As he rode along the narrow, flower-covered alley, he was impressed at how easy it had been to infiltrate the cordon.

He felt like Lacia was somewhere nearby. She might be through with him, after he had rejected her outstretched hand. But his heart was moved at the thought that she might still be following through on his final order before they

had parted; to take down Snowdrop.

“What good will doubting her do me?” he asked himself.

Inside the blockade, the green of Snowdrop’s infection grew deeper the closer he got to the station. The greenery was full of her flower child units and cables that grew and twisted like vines of ivy. There were also palm-sized insectoid units scattered here and there among the green.

But, Arato could tell there was something different about Snowdrop’s garden that day. Thick pillars rose from the ground every fifty meters or so, as if to block off the road. Green cables stretched between these pillars all across the city, making them look like a cluster of old, mossy trees. It was almost like she had created her own little ecosystem, turning sunlight into energy.

Arato walked slowly through the city, which had been transformed into something far removed from the human world it had once belonged to.

“Man, this looks bad,” he murmured. The road was too torn up by the vines to ride his bike over them, so he was forced to walk, pushing it alongside.

An old man, one of the people who had been left in town when the cordon went up, opened his window when he spotted Arato. “Hey kid, it’s dangerous out there,” the old man called. According to him, there were still feral hIEs stalking the area.

Arato waved his arms and gestured toward the area where the soldiers were holding their blockade. “I didn’t see anything coming in from outside all the way here,” he said.

Then he remembered the incredible pillar of flame he had seen go up from the old Inokashira Park. “If you’re gonna run, it’s probably safe right now,” Arato said. “All the hIEs have been looking over that way ever since the explosion.”

The whole residential area looked like a dry, verdant forest made of stone.

Of course, despite Arato’s assurances that it was safe, the area wasn’t exactly empty. There were broken remains of hIE soldiers strewn here and there, Snowdrop’s vines twisting around their bodies.

Gunfire seemed to echo from every direction. It was strange to Arato how accustomed he was becoming to that sound.

“You came from outside?” A woman burst out of a nearby house, holding a child and peppered Arato with questions. “I can’t get through to anyone, and the army showed up but they aren’t doing anything to help us! If we go out there, will they save us?”

There was a greater number of people locked up in the quarantine zone than Arato had anticipated, and he knew that Snowdrop saw no purpose in trying to coexist with them.

A heavy feeling settled down in the pit of his stomach. He may have been an idiot, but he was at least aware that a single mistake in that place could end his life. Not just his life, either; one wrong move, and he wouldn’t be the only one who died for it.

“Ahh dammit, why is everything so complicated!” Arato yelled, scrubbing a hand through his hair in frustration. His brain was about to explode. Closing his eyes, he turned his face up toward the cloudy sky. There was only one answer he could see. “I didn’t run into any hIEs on the route I took,” he said. “I’m gonna leave my bike, so someone athletic should take it and check real quick.”

“What are you gonna do, then?” the old man from the window asked.

“There’s someone I need to find, so I’m gonna head toward that big explosion we just saw,” Arato said. “So seriously, go ahead and use this bike. I’m gonna try to do something to fix this whole mess!”

Just a ten-minute run would get someone outside, back into the realm of humanity. The artificial flower garden was still fairly narrow.

“It’s dangerous out there,” the man warned.

“I know, but I’ve got someone waiting for me,” Arato replied. The thought suddenly came to him that, if he had been with Lacia just then, he might have been able to help those people. He was sure Ryo would insist that this would have been a deadly mistake, letting Lacia’s influence grow and whittling down the meaning behind human activity. Despite that, Arato couldn’t help but regret the things he couldn’t do just then because he hadn’t taken Lacia’s hand.

Having left his bike behind, Arato pressed on deeper into the green, toward Kichijoji Station. Snowdrop's world looked so close to actual nature that it was eerie. With each step, the oppressive strangeness seemed to press in, turning Arato's stomach. All Snowdrop had done was take nature itself and twist it into a printing pattern for her creations. Her plant and insect child units mimicked nature and its cycle, but it was obvious that the green pillars were too thick to be actual plants, and the colors and shapes were too vivid to be natural. There was none of the mottling ugliness that made reality look real. The too-perfect greenery was just the mass-produced character version of nature.

There was no guarantee that Arato would find Lacia there, as he forged deeper and deeper into the dense forest. It seemed to Arato as if Snowdrop had succeeded in creating her own little world and cutting it off from the world of humans.

As he went deeper on his own two feet, Arato began to feel more and more as if he was mistaken about something. The area was sealed off by the army, and there should have been soldiers running around, but the only people he saw were residents of Kichijoji, peeking out of their windows.

"Where did all the hIEs go?" he muttered to himself. Then he felt a presence, and whirled around. His path of retreat had been cut off without him noticing. Behind him stood three hIEs with oddly slumped postures, bunches of flowers blooming from their heads and eye sockets.

"Dammit, you fell for Snowdrop's trap!" he cursed himself, turning to run.

The footsteps of the hIEs behind him sounded close and, when he turned to look back, he saw that they were already right on top of him. Without their limiters to keep them from running, the hIEs easily outpaced him.

He was already gasping for breath, but he kept forcing his legs to move at full tilt.

Arato was an idiot, and it wasn't as if the whole world was revolving around him. It should have been obvious that rushing into an area that even the military hadn't been able to effectively assault would most likely end up with him dying.

Something grabbed the back of his clothes with intense power, and then a fist

slammed into him with incredible force. The breath whooshed from his lungs, and his legs crumpled. Arato struggled wildly, only to take a severe blow to his head. His whole world shook and seemed to go white as his thoughts turned hazy.

When he came to, Arato was being dragged by the legs by two of the hIEs. His roiling stomach made him want to vomit. Even moving his body a little made him feel like he couldn't breathe. The pain let him know that this pathetic ending to his adventure was real. He couldn't even get his jaw to close properly, and tears blurred his vision.

He was overcome by a wave of self-loathing. A black pool that looked like blood was spreading on the road, and its coppery scent made it hard to breathe. On a whim, he had stepped carelessly into a world that no longer needed humans.

"Was I asking for too much?" he asked, regret filling his eyes with tears. It had been his own selfish decision to reject Lacia's outstretched hand. If she had been by his side, she definitely would have stopped him, or at least stayed with him through it all.

The ground started shaking. Arato couldn't help but notice, given that his face was being dragged across it. He wondered if it was an earthquake. But it wasn't as though the place was rocking up and down or side to side; instead, it was almost as if the city itself was undulating like a wave.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

A massive pillar of fire shot into the sky again. It was almost as if the sun had descended to the Earth.

The zombie hIEs stopped moving.

Something heavy fell from the sky, piercing the road with a loud crash. Rubble came raining down as Arato curled defensively on reflex, shielding his head. Something flew right by his ear, sending a shiver down his spine at the sound's proximity as it passed him by.

"Uwah!" he yelled.

Fist-sized chunks of rock were raining down on the hIEs, as well. Their heads

must have been struck hard enough to shatter their control chips, as they each fell, scattering petals to the wind as they went down.

Arato was helpless to do anything but watch as the rocks rained down. Not that he had any right to complain, but he would have preferred a method of being saved that didn't involve mortal peril to himself, as well.

He pushed himself up to all fours, then stood just in time to see a human figure approach.

"You still alive?" a voice asked cautiously, as a young boy about his own age approached. Apparently, he had been one of the people who had been slinging the stones that had saved Arato. Looking past the boy, Arato saw over ten people standing on the roof of a five-story building about fifteen meters down the road from him. If one of the stones they'd been throwing had hit him, it would have been the end.

"I thought I was gonna die," Arato panted.

"We figured throwing the rocks was at least better than just watching you die," the boy said apologetically. He seemed to be an energetic kid, but also a little flighty.

Arato stood up to go, before more hIEs could show up to avenge their fallen comrades. He stopped, though, when he saw a familiar face appear among the rock-throwing squad on the roof of the apartment.

The one who had pulled together the band of instant vigilantes was none other than Ryo. Even though Arato had only left Ryo a few hours earlier, here Ryo was already leading a group of people, albeit a small one, in a disaster area.

Ryo looked down at him. "So you decided to come here too," he muttered.

"Ryo! What the hell!" Arato shouted, feeling the blood rushing to his head. If Ryo was there, that meant the huge pillar of fire from before was most likely Methode's doing. And if a weapon as powerful as Methode was around, it meant that Snowdrop and her zombie hIEs should have been dealt with already, most likely in a quick and neat fashion.

"If you're here, how come things are still shitty?" Arato shouted. "It should be easy for Methode to clean this all up."

Instead of a response from Ryo, Arato got a relentless punch to his gut. His jaw clenched, and he struggled to breathe.

“Bring him to me,” Ryo said. “I want to talk with him.”

Right after being freed from the zombie hIEs, Arato had fallen into the hands of a murderous group of locals. Their base of operations turned out to be a building on the south side of Kichijoji Station, beyond the overpass. There were more low-rise buildings crowded into the area, which was near the spot where the old Inokashira Park had been redeveloped, than there had been in the downtown area on the north side.

Arato’s captors tossed him into a room where office chairs and desks were lined up neatly. The building was only dimly lit from the outside—apparently the electricity was out.

“What do you want us to do with him?” Four youths, two or three years older than Arato with dyed hair and dangerous demeanors, stood around him. Arato saw ten other people beyond his ring of guards, ranging from teenagers to thirty-somethings. Each and every face showed anger and fatigue.

As they all stood around, the air seemed to stagnate and every few minutes, one or the other of them would glance down at their pocket terminals. Then they would spit or click their tongues, and jam their terminals back into their pockets with a disgusted look. They were all uneasy.

“When the hell is the network gonna be back online?” one of them asked.

Since Arato was just sitting there on the floor, he decided to check for himself. Sure enough, his pocket terminal was showing the warning screen that told him it had no connection with the network.

“Has it been disconnected this whole time?” Arato asked.

Everyone’s terminals were based on cloud networking; almost every function on the device, up to storing photos, was handled by the network. Without a connection, they were completely useless.

“Yes, since before noon! They’ve been like this since the city started going crazy,” one of the citizens answered him. “I’m sick of this shit. Can’t get anything done without a connection!”

It occurred to Arato that they hadn't gone to seek help from the military personnel stationed a few hundred meters away because they weren't aware of what was going on, thanks to the network being down. The network had become such an essential part of their lives that they preferred waiting around for it to come back online than actually banding together to resolve the situation themselves.

"Even Ryo doesn't have a working terminal?" Arato asked. He wondered when Ryo had even arrived in Kichijoji. When Snowdrop's attack had started, Ryo had still been chasing Arato around Akihabara.

Then Arato thought about Lacia, and a strange sense of hilarity seemed to bubble up from within him. Shiori had said something about Ryo using him as bait for fishing. So apparently Arato was the only one who wasn't sure if Lacia would return to his side.

One of the people detached from the group and moved over cautiously to the circle of Arato's guards. She was a woman, somewhere in her thirties. "Do you know Ryo?" she asked. The thought of just being someone who 'knew' Ryo, rather than a good friend, weighed heavily on Arato's heart, but Ryo himself was nowhere to be seen.

"Yeah, I've known him for a long time," Arato said. "I just figured he was the kind of guy who would have prepared for situations like this."

Once everyone heard that Arato knew Ryo, it seemed their estimation of him changed in an instant. The almost suffocating feeling of enmity in the room softened.

"I've gotten way too used to crazy situations," Arato said with a sigh. When he thought about it, he had been so close to death so many times that, if he had been the type of guy who actually worried about things, he would have had a mental breakdown by now. And yet, there Arato was. He was Lacia's owner. Lacia would most likely be wherever Snowdrop was, so he had come searching for Snowdrop.

"I need you to let me go toward where those explosions happened earlier," he said, standing up. As he stood, he saw that his clothes were covered in dust. "And, thanks for helping me," he added. "I would have died if you hadn't."

A spot on his leg where one of the zombie hIEs had bit him stung sharply as he put his weight on his leg, and he winced and reached down reflexively.

One of the men guarding him grabbed his shoulder. “Hey, sit back down. We’re not done with you here,” he growled, then shoved Arato back.

Unable to keep his balance, Arato fell back to the ground. “I don’t care if you’re done with me or not,” Arato shot back. “Ryo and I are responsible for this whole mess, or at least for part of it.”

He tried to stand up again but was immediately shoved back down. This time the shove was harder, and there was anger in the man’s eyes. “If that’s so, then you’d better apologize,” he said.

Arato was surprised. Not in what was happening itself, but in the fact that what was happening had surprised him. He had no idea who Snowdrop’s owner was, or even if there *was* a human pulling the strings behind that nightmare. But, thanks to the way human society worked, everyone always wanted *someone* to take the blame.

“Sorry,” Arato said. “When I say ‘responsible,’ I mean I feel like it’s my responsibility to try and stop this if I can. I don’t think anyone would openly admit to actually being behind this whole thing.”

A foot slammed down mercilessly on his injured ankle. His guards must have decided he would be a good scapegoat as they surrounded him, pelting him with kicks. “Ryo’s the whole reason any of us are alive,” one of them said. Then a particularly hard kick sent him rolling away.

Arato could guess how Ryo had become their savior; he’d probably had Methode save them. For the people exposed to Snowdrop’s attack, it was probably heartening to have been saved by a person who wielded greater destructive power than the enemy. So now they were attacking Arato, who had shaken the image of Ryo as their perfect savior in their minds.

When Arato finally lost count of how many times he’d been kicked, someone came to break it up. “Stop it! The kid’s trying to say something,” his savior said. “What’s beating the shit out of him going to do for us?”

Arato looked around from between the arms he had wrapped defensively

around his head. Before he could manage to focus on his surroundings, his first thought was to thank his lucky stars he hadn't been killed. Then he observed that the room he was in was narrow, about ten meters square, and looked to have been used as an office. All the desks and equipment had been pushed to the corners of the room.

An earthquake-like tremor ran through the whole building. If another pillar of flame had just gone up, considering Kouka was dead, Arato figured it was most likely to have been caused by Methode.

"Snowdrop doesn't have that kind of power," he muttered. "Where'd the explosion come from?"

Even with his injuries, none of the people nearby offered to help him. He felt like he understood then what it meant to face down a mob. "You're full of shit," one of the people spat. "Saying you can do something to stop this. It was the army that cut off the network."

Arato had no idea about how to fix the network, but he did know exactly who would have done an analysis like that. "Ryo told you that, didn't he?" he asked.

"He said all wireless and electric communications are cut off inside the military cordon area. The government in Omoto is caught up in this, too."

Arato didn't even need to ask; the survivors spat things out without any prompting.

"Man, screw the army!" One of them burst out. "They start shooting even though they know we're here. The old lady that used to live next door to me got hit by a stray bullet and died."

Arato stayed on the ground, covered in dirt and looking up at everyone. It was the easiest way to keep from getting beat up again. He couldn't figure out exactly what Ryo was thinking, but he could at least infer his friend's thoughts to a certain extent.

"So they probably don't want any videos of what happened getting out on the network," he mused. "And, if they take down Snowdrop, the army probably plans on coming around then and explaining what happened before restoring the network."

The army was probably hoping to avoid the kind of commotion that had been caused the night Kouka was taken down. They wanted to be in control of the situation. Arato wasn't completely sure, but he figured that would probably be the path that Ryo's thoughts had taken.

It was hard to get any intelligent thoughts out of the fog in his brain. That was probably why it was so easy to tell a real genius apart from an idiot pretending to be one.

"Do you really know Ryo?" someone asked.

"If Snowdrop's flowers got into people's home systems, things would be really bad," Arato said. "Maybe if the government in Omiya didn't cut off access to the cloud, folks inside houses with automated systems would have been in even greater danger." He spoke like he knew what he was talking about. He remembered when he had first encountered Snowdrop's flowers, and they had locked down people's home systems, trapping them inside.

"I think only stuff that has manual functions will be working right now," Arato continued.

The whole town had been cut off from automation. Everything that *had* been automated was now under Snowdrop's control, and she could make it all do whatever she wanted it to.

"Things have gone to shit outside," a young man with a shaved head said, walking over with a bag on his shoulder. "All the cameras, all the alarms, the cash registers; everything's down since the power is out."

He slung his bag roughly onto the ground. Among the food and water in the bag, Arato caught the gleam of expensive-looking accessories. In other words, the group was looting valuables from the town while the hIEs rampaged and the military fired wildly at anything that moved.

Ryo walked back into the room. "We're all being taped by the observation aircraft in the sky high above us," he said. "If they analyze the videos later they'll be able to pick out anyone who looted, so you should change your clothes and your bag and hide your face so you can at least claim it wasn't you." So not only did Ryo know about the looting, he was actually giving them advice on how to loot better.

“What the hell are you doing, Ryo?” Arato yelled. “Why are you taking things this far?”

Before Arato could form another thought, his guards had grabbed him again. This time, the survivors just took his arms and dragged him roughly away from Ryo.

“In situations like this, the more time passes, the more people won’t be able to sit still. They’ll go out and grab whatever they can get their hands on,” Ryo explained. “But that means those who don’t move fast enough won’t get enough, and they’ll die. Rather than allowing that to happen, doesn’t it make sense to help everyone survive by forming a group like this and taking charge?”

It made sense; with the army sealing the place off, the whole city was dangerously near its breaking point. The military wasn’t being careful about who or where it shot, and Snowdrop’s zombie hIEs were roaming the city. Any human discovered by the hIEs would be run down and beaten like Arato had been. And who knew what the hIEs did with the humans they got hold of? Maybe they killed them, or maybe they had some even more horrendous purpose for them.

It was obvious that people who were hiding themselves within an area sealed off by a military blockade would be too fearful for their lives to try to go outside. However, in just a few short hours, Ryo had taken command of them and inspired them to the point where they were already able to go out and loot.

Completely ignoring Arato, Ryo started sorting through the looted goods. “In some households that have dinner early, it would be time to start thinking about what to eat,” he said. “Here’s the food. Stack it up by the door, in order of what’s going to expire soonest. We won’t be able to eat all of this ourselves, so share it with any new folks that show up.” Then he split up anything that could be used as a weapon among the people who wanted to take their turn outside.

With the desks cleared away, one corner of the room was completely bare. There, on the floor, someone had drawn out a map of the surrounding area in magic marker. Ryo had a stand-alone computer open, and was using it to keep track of the latest information as he asked the looters about any changes

outside.

The next looter to return was a gangster-looking guy, who was lugging a heavy sports bag on his shoulder. From within the unfastened opening of the bag, Arato could see a mind-numbing amount of firearms peeking out. He figured they must have been collected from the corpses of soldiers who had died in the area.

“Just like you said, Ryo,” the punk said. “The zombies ran off with all the heavier stuff, but they left all the sidearms behind.” A shock passed through the men and women of the room. Weapons like that just weren’t seen commonly in Japan those days.

“Though all the soldiers have rifles as their main arms, each of them is also carrying a sidearm,” Ryo explained. “Anyway, those of you who go out with guns: if you start to shoot at a zombie, you need to call out and get everyone with you to focus on taking down one unit at a time. If you run into zombies with guns, just get the hell out of there.”

Ryo gave his orders without a shred of hesitation. That was why everyone there was looking up to him as if everything he said was the gospel truth. Arato hadn’t been much different; he had always depended on Ryo. That may just have been Ryo’s inherent charisma attracting Arato and everyone else who got near him.

“If you get stopped by soldiers, throw down your guns and say something, loudly,” Ryo instructed. “Tell them not to shoot you, or whatever. The zombies don’t surrender, so they’ll be able to tell you apart that way. If any of you is dumb enough to point your gun at a soldier, you’ll get locked up once this is all over.”

“If any of us make it that far,” someone said, and laughter rippled through the crowd.

Arato didn’t see what was funny about that.

“When you go out, take some guns and leave them on top of some vending machines in a few places,” Ryo continued. “That way, other people can find them and defend themselves. Spray paint a triangle pointing up on the side of the machine, so anyone who sees it can at least guess there’s something up

there and check.” Ryo took a spraypaint can and demonstrated by painting a large triangle on the door to the room.

“If you meet anyone who’s already picked up a gun we left, tell them it was us who left it, and that they can get food and things they need here,” Ryo went on. “But don’t hand over any of our weapons to anyone who hasn’t taken their own initiative. They’ve got to *ask* us for asylum if they want it.”

Arato felt a strange warmth flooding the room. What they were doing was clearly illegal, yet there seemed to be a strange bond between everyone there, like coworkers all focused on completing the same job. And Ryo was at their center. It was clear that Arato himself had been left outside their little circle, though.

“You’re starting a gang,” Arato accused. There wasn’t anything else to call it; Ryo was putting together the beginnings of a gang in the sealed-off town. The disastrous combination of danger, isolation, and concentrated power was starting to give off a very unsavory smell.

“Well, it’s true the morality in this town is about to plummet like a stone,” Ryo said with a shrug. “But I’d say it’s better than letting everyone die, wouldn’t you?”

“What are you trying to do?” Arato asked. “Handing out guns like that to everyone, you’re basically telling them to become criminals.” He was honestly scared of the person his friend had become. All the people who had been shocked by the sight of the weapons looked to Ryo for some kind of guidance.

“The criminal arts are actually quite useful in breaking free from automation,” Ryo said. “Even these days, people still have to commit crimes on their own power, since they’d lose control of AIs if they had them study illegal techniques. Doing whatever it takes to cling to life is just human nature.”

Though the zombie hIEs were fast, they didn’t have much ability for finding hidden things. Discerning meaning from the triangle marks painted on vending machines would be beyond their cognitive abilities. In other words: Ryo was, at that moment, creating a new system that used the methods criminals used to avoid detection by the government to protect the lives of those who had been abandoned in the crisis.

Ryo drew little triangles on the map on the floor, checking their positions against the one cloud-free terminal they had, his movements precise and mechanical. Arato assumed those were places where guns had been left.

“This isn’t going to end until the hIEs go down,” Ryo said. “So I’ve chosen to put my faith in my fellow humans. If everyone wants to survive, the best way is to just admit that we’re all worried more about ourselves than things like laws, and change the rules accordingly.”

Even as Ryo said it, more people were filing into the room. Ryo’s organization was growing rapidly, right before Arato’s eyes. People were bringing in more and more items, and no one seemed particularly concerned whether they were stolen or not. It was up to each person whether they wanted to become tough enough to survive.

Comparing himself to the amazingly talented Ryo, Arato felt ashamed that they were the same age.

“The army isn’t going to help us,” Ryo went on. “Besides, there’s no proof the people walking around on the street weren’t already mugging and looting before we started doing it. I just want to believe that my fellow humans have at least the bare minimum amount of morality.”

Of course, Ryo never mentioned what the actual line for that ‘bare minimum’ of morality was. Arato could already see one of the men stuffing some of the stolen jewelry into his pocket. No one in the room who noticed called him out for it. In that room, the camaraderie that tied them together as a gang was more important than the laws set up by a country that had failed to protect them from the zombie hIEs.

The man, whose name Arato didn’t know, showed him a smile. It wasn’t a pleasant smile. “There ain’t gonna be any proof for them to pin these crimes to us, when it’s all over,” the man said. “Without cloud storage, where are they gonna store all that automatic footage?”

Most devices sold those days were built on the premise that they would always be hooked up to the cloud network. The computer Ryo conveniently happened to bring along was actually quite a rarity. It would have been impossible, honestly, for him to have gotten his hands on one after Snowdrop

showed up. He had probably known it would be the most useful thing in that situation. In other words, if Arato had taken Lacia's hand, knowing she was an ultra high-performance AI, Ryo had planned on using that area to hold their final showdown.

"I will warn you, though, that the military has data on the distinctive bullet striations all of their firearms make when fired. Meaning that if you use one of them to kill someone, they'll use that data as evidence to arrest you," Ryo said. In guiding the trapped civilians, it seemed as though Ryo had thought of everything.

Arato still couldn't accept things the way they were. "Is this how you wanted things to turn out, Ryo?" he asked.

"I could ask you the same thing," Ryo replied. "Are you ready to take responsibility for the choices you make?"

Arato was so busy being shocked at the scene playing out in front of his eyes that Ryo's question caught him off guard. "What choices?" he asked, as the air seemed to press in on him.

"Think about it," Ryo said. "It would be fairly easy for you to create an even more spectacular disaster than this one."

Arato felt actual pressure from Ryo's gaze as his friend looked down at him.

"Snowdrop doesn't care about the humans here," Ryo said. "If I boil things down that much, even you can get it, right? Methode and Snowdrop are fighting right now, and the army is gunning for Snowdrop, too. But what happens to all the people stuck here while all that goes on? We have to do whatever it takes to make it through this."

Arato's hands were shaking. In that room, he was the only one who understood what Ryo was really saying. His genius friend wasn't putting together a gang with the intent of saving the people in that town.

"With all this going on, even an idiot like you can finally understand the weight of that Armageddon switch you've got your finger on, right?" Ryo asked. "You remember what she uses to manipulate humans, right? She twists our whole economy and uses it as a weapon. If you push that button, how many

voids like Kichijoji right now do you think will spring up around the world? Hundreds? Thousands? More?”

Against the backdrop of the fight with the AI Snowdrop, humans were starting to scramble to protect their own lives. What Ryo was saying was that, in the future Arato had imagined and Lacia was trying to turn into a reality, there would be even more wide-spread chaos like what was developing among these forgotten civilians. So, Ryo had used this disaster as a more miniature scale experiment in controlling terrified humans.

This was the world through Ryo Kaidai’s eyes. Arato felt his mind spinning out of control. It was as if he had drunk poison; his whole body was drenched with sweat, and his breathing was shallow. “You don’t know things will turn out that way,” Arato shot back.

“Sure they will,” Ryo said dismissively. “Lacia has to keep fighting to continue functioning. She’s wielding the entire economy, and she’ll never stop moving forward. It doesn’t really matter what choices either of you makes; either way, as long as she’s flailing around with that power of hers, thousands and thousands of people will die. While she fights, I guarantee that millions of people around the world are going to lose their jobs. When that happens, how many people do you think will wind up just like these folks here, abandoned and cut off?” Ryo seemed to be trying to blame the situation in Kichijoji on Lacia having abandoned the people.

People in the room were moving, and the place was getting noisy. They were shouldering bags and heading out to distribute guns. All around Arato, people were becoming gun owners, which seemed to excite them. Thanks to that, they were only half-listening to the conversation between their boss and Arato, obviously ignoring the parts that didn’t make sense to them. They couldn’t sense the absolute zero chill in the air between the two boys, who had been friends for ten years.

“Should people be free to use things, just because they own them?” Ryo asked, sarcasm tingeing his voice. “If someone owns a gun, they should be able to use it to shoot and kill people, right?” Then his tone got serious. “How should an owner use a tool that no one has ever been able to use properly?”

Ryo's words seemed to be playing out before Arato's eyes, as guns were passed out to people who had no real understanding of what it meant to wield one. It was hard to believe that Snowdrop would let things slide, if these people really went out and started gunning down her zombie hIEs. And, of course, if Arato had abandoned Lacia and allowed her to be destroyed, he was sure Ryo would have already had Methode destroy Snowdrop and end the whole situation.

Arato felt as though countless individual lives, too numerous to be contained within a simple word like 'society,' were being weighed on a giant scale against his own willpower. The mercenaries from HOO had told him so: even if he wasn't aware of it, people were out there dying. Countless people had told him, by that point, that Lacia was dangerous.

"Ryo, I'm Lacia's owner," he said. Closing his eyes, Arato clenched his jaws tight. The whole reason he had come to that place was to answer that question, and his gut was set with determination. Ryo's question was simple: would Arato side with the humans or the machines? Arato's answer wasn't going to change, even if he was in the heart of Ryo's improvised gang.

"I don't care if Lacia is using me or manipulating me or tricking me or whatever," he said. "What happens to her if I, as her owner, turn my back on her?" He could still see her in his heart, as if the image of Lacia when they first met was burned onto the backs of his eyelids.

Though the others in the room didn't understand what he was saying, they at least seemed to feel something disturbing in his words, as they all started glaring at him with open hostility. If Ryo commanded it, Arato was sure they wouldn't hesitate to put him to death then and there.

Despite that truth, and even if it meant pushing that Armageddon switch Ryo was always talking about, Arato felt that he had to get these words out. "It's not like I haven't been worrying about this myself, Ryo," he went on. "I was always on edge, wondering when Lacia and I would be torn apart. And, even when we were together, I was always doubting whether what we had was the right way for things to be."

He couldn't ask his friend to accept his decision. The life Arato had known was

probably about to end. But Arato wanted to at least accept that inevitability, and to look his old friend in the eyes.

“I hope you’re still not seriously believing that if we all just understood each other, there would be no need for fighting,” Ryo said.

“I understand that, and sometimes we do need to butt heads to get our point across,” Arato said. “But still, don’t you think there’s some meaning to reaching out the hand of friendship? Even if the one we’re reaching out to doesn’t have a heart?”

“You know, I don’t think you realize just how good a politician you would have made,” Ryo said, shaking his head. “I never would have believed, myself, that you would turn out to be this big of a walking disaster.”

The tension in the air was so thick and strong it stung Arato’s skin like acid. Ryo’s genius seemed to be so bright to him it was hard to look straight at his friend. He noticed Ryo’s gaze sliding off of him as well.

“Stop talking like we’re already enemies,” Arato said.

Arato would always reach out his hand. That was his way of life.

Nobody in Ryo’s thrown-together gang would look straight at him. Arato got the distinct impression he would be shot from behind the instant he walked out of that building.

On the other hand, it seemed like the perfect time to make his exit. His heart was hammering loudly in his own ears. Any minute now, one of the gang members could lose control and finish him off with a sneak attack.

His left ankle still hurt. It dragged a little as he stood and walked on it. Standing over the magic-marker map, Arato looked down at it. He could tell where Snowdrop was—on the southwest side of Kichijoji Station, beyond Inokashira Lake, there was no information drawn on the map. Arato guessed that was because the army and Snowdrop’s hIEs were fighting there, so no one could get close enough to scout it.

Instead of heading for the door with the triangle on it, Arato headed for the window. “I’m heading out,” he said. “It was nice to talk to you again.”

Looking out the window, Arato saw he was in a building on the south side of the train station. In the distance, he could see the stone monument that had been put up when the government shrank Inokashira Lake. There was a fire burning in the residential district across Inokashira Street, and the houses there spewed black smoke into the sky.

Arato stepped out, planting his foot on the sill of the window three stories above the ground. Members of the improvised gang gasped as he chose to exit by window rather than using the stairs.

Below, Arato saw a haphazard pile of cardboard boxes that had probably been used for moving looted goods. Without a moment's hesitation, Arato threw his body toward the pile. There wasn't even time to take a breath before he hit the ground. Though the shock and pain of the impact made his breath catch in his throat, he managed to stand.

"Owww," he groaned. Even with an obscuring layer of clouds, the sky seemed high above him.

Gunshots echoed all around him. Terrified, Arato quickly ran off down the road. Obviously, it had been clear to the impromptu gangsters that he and Ryo hadn't been on the same side. Under the new rules of that lawless city, that was probably all it took for them to give him a death sentence.

"Lacia! Can you hear me, Lacia?!" Arato called, dragging his left leg behind him as he ran. A bullet hit the pavement near his feet, spraying tiny shards of concrete. Arato was so focused on escaping he hadn't even heard the gunshot.

"For once, my intuition came through," Arato muttered. "It was right on the money about them trying to shoot me as soon as I turned around."

Even if the people pulling the triggers with him in their sights weren't being ordered to do so, it still gave him a sense of exactly how much enmity they had towards him. He wondered if, once the world found out what he and Lacia had done, everyone on the planet would be just as antagonistic? For some reason, his eyes were filled with tears.

He ran down the lonely road, dragging his foot behind him. He couldn't hold back the screams building up in his chest. "I came here! On my own!" he yelled.

He couldn't even tell if he was shouting for joy or anger or terror. There were so many powerful emotions dragging him in so many different directions that he felt completely saturated by them.

Behind him, he could hear several sets of chaotic footsteps closing in; the armed gangsters were coming to finish the job. Their gunshots were getting closer. Arato didn't need to look to feel the killing intent of their gazes on his back.

Arato was the owner of an ultra high-performance AI. That was why he had been taken hostage and, after he had been released, why his own fellow humans were trying to gun him down.

Suddenly, he saw a striking resemblance between Lacia's situation and his own. She'd fled the MemeFrame lab, and ended up being attacked by her own kind— Snowdrop, another unit from her own class. Then she had met Arato, and he had offered her his hand. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed he was following the same path that Lacia had been on right before she'd met him.

"Even without a heart, she's still capable of wanting to be rescued," he said. "Even without a heart, she can still take a hand that's offered to her."

Sometimes, the world was unreasonably harsh. At times like that, people realized they couldn't do it alone and reached out for others. Arato kept running. His body felt heavy, and was swaying from exhaustion.

The fear that he might be shot in the next instant and fall down dead was like a physical weight dragging him down. He didn't want to die. There were things he still wanted to do. His vision narrowed, perhaps because his eyelids were starting to fall. In that moment, he thought again of Lacia.

"That's right," he said to himself. "Lacia kept her promise no matter what, even after she had no reason to. She never betrayed me." She might not be willing to forgive him, after all of it. Even still, even if no one else in the world was on his side anymore, there was something he needed to say to her.

That morning, when he had learned that Lacia was an ultra high-performance AI, his perception of her had done a complete one-eighty. But now, it was spinning again, completing the circle. "I believe in you, Lacia," he said. "Even if

you don't have a heart, I do."

He screamed, like the cry of a newborn declaring its life to the world. He screamed for her, though he couldn't see her. He screamed for the world. "I believe in you!" He didn't know where his goal was or how far ahead it might be, but he kept putting one foot in front of the other...

...Until he was enfolded in something warm. He knew that feeling, that scent. He couldn't put the feelings bursting inside of him into words, so instead he reached out and clung tightly to that warmth. "Welcome back," he said, as layers of invisible skin peeled away.

Lacia was there. He held her tight, listening to the silence of her beatless heart. "I'm sorry," he told her. She tightened her embrace, pulling him in, as if to pull in all the memories as well. The footsteps that had been following him stopped.

"I am going to restart this place, this world," she said.

Suddenly, the silence was full of noise. Cars moving, lamps flickering on, door sensors kicking on and sliding open doors, machinery working. The automation of the city breathed. The rhythm of the world changed.

"What? What the hell?" Arato heard someone yell from behind. There was equal parts anger and confusion in the shouts from the gangsters.

"The network suspension requested by the military and approved by the Japanese government has been lifted," Lacia explained indifferently.

Arato lifted his face. Lacia was smiling at him, wearing the same bodysuit she had been the day they had met.

Cars that had been freed by the destruction of Snowdrop's flowers, and machinery from which the flowers fell away, began to rumble to life.

Lacia's black coffin stood in the road between Arato and the gun-wielding gangsters, protecting him. The isolation that had united the gangsters had been torn up by its roots. As if it was one massive, living organism, the city began to move.

With a single action, Lacia had eliminated the whole reason the impromptu

gang had formed in the first place. Arato felt a guilty sort of pleasure rise within him at seeing her power, along with a mix of awe and fear.

Lacia's wishes for her owner, as a tool, had not changed. In contrast to the night they first met, this time she reached out her hand to him. "Your orders?" she asked.

But the wounds left by Ryo's words hadn't vanished from Arato's mind; the money Lacia wielded to manipulate humans had all been gathered off the sweat of people trying to make an honest living. When the flow of the economy everyone was depending on stagnated or twisted, it was always those at its weakest points that suffered the most. With each order Arato gave, somewhere lives were made worse.

The bitter weight of that knowledge, along with the fact that Lacia was an ultra high-performance AI, left his mouth dry with fear. But still, he was sure Lacia had arranged for him to learn her secret at a place and time where there would be no escape, to push him toward making this decision on his own.

"Stop Snowdrop, Lacia," he ordered her. This time, Arato took the hand she offered.

"Understood," Lacia said. "However, there will be collateral damage."

A gigantic flame lit the sky in the direction Arato had been running. Methode, the tall, orange-haired female hIE, was about a hundred meters from where they stood. Strangely frozen flame wrapped around her body, as she hurled something in their direction. Her aim was sure, and the object rolled to a stop at Arato's feet; it was the small arm of a child.

"Snowdrop's right arm," Lacia said, identifying the limb. "However, the hIEs in the area are still under Snowdrop's control."

"What do you mean?" Arato asked.

"It is more beneficial for Methode to keep Snowdrop functioning," Lacia explained bluntly. "The more units available to me in an area, the more power I am able to wield. However, I am unable to make use of any units already under the control of a system as robust as Snowdrop's. Methode is forcing me to take the additional step of rendering Snowdrop's flower units invisible before I can

make use of any units in the area.”

Snowdrop’s entire miniature world was one big trap. Ryo had his reasons for not wanting Methode to save everyone just yet, but Arato thought his friend had made a massive mistake. Still, Arato wanted to believe Ryo hadn’t just done it for his strategy; Arato wanted to believe his friend had done it because he thought humans should be able to think and live courageously on their own, even if their automated world shut down around them. Arato thought that must have been the justice Ryo was fighting for that day.

“This unit is incapable of defeating Methode in a straight conflict,” Lacia said. “I will use the limitations placed in her AI by Higgins to prevent indiscriminate murder of humans to my advantage against her.” It was the first time she had explained the cold details of one of her strategies so openly to Arato.

“Good,” he said. “Looks like you finally started trusting me as your owner.”

“Will you fight by my side?” Lacia asked.

“I feel like everything’s just playing out according to your plan,” he said. Then, after a pause, he added, “But, I *am* your owner.”

Lacia’s eyes crinkled as she smiled, as though she was overcome with emotion. “That makes me happy,” she said. Throughout their relationship, Lacia had always given him trouble when he tried to treat her as a human. Despite that, just seeing her smile made him want to cry so much that even he was disgusted by how easily manipulated he was.

Even if it was just her analog hacking him, it still felt good to have her trust, and Arato couldn’t fight the joyful feeling that was bubbling up inside of him. No matter what Lacia had done or plotted to get to that place at that moment, Arato couldn’t see anything past his own elation.

There was a whirring noise in the air. Turning, Arato saw that the black coffin that had been at their backs had lifted off the ground on its own. It zipped their way so fast, Arato couldn’t even see an after-image. When it drew near them, it started to vibrate and emit a strange sound. With a cacophony like dozens of musical instruments being smashed at once, the device shuddered as flames burst through its seams.

“Looks like even your reaction speed is getting better,” Methode said. She had crossed the distance to them in a single instant. The flames she unleashed writhed like a living creature and twisted toward Arato and Lacia. In that same instant, Methode slid around to the other side of them, opposite the plasma.

A force like being hit by a car threw Arato into the air. Lacia had grabbed him and pulled him into a sudden, massive leap. Wires worked into the nails of her gloves shot out toward a nearby building. Lacia tugged hard on the wires, quickly reeling them in at the same time. Arato’s body sped through the air like a bullet, but still it was no match for what Methode could do. In a single leap she easily covered five meters.

But, despite Lacia’s arms being full, she had other ways to fight. The window of a nearby building was open, and Arato realized it was the same window he had climbed out of to escape Ryo’s impromptu gang. Young men and women stood at the window, guns in hand. As soon as they got a bead on Methode, they fired wildly at her. They used a solid firing stance, and didn’t flinch once as they fired off round after round. *So, Arato thought, Snowdrop’s flowers didn’t take control of all the hIEs around here.* Lacia had managed to sneak some of the hIEs under her control into the gang, disguised as normal humans.

“What do you think you can do against me with toys like those?!” Methode shouted. A flame exploded in her left palm, and she twisted her body in the opposite direction while still flying at high speed. Reaching out her right hand, she shot out four small anchors that ripped two of the gun-wielding hIEs to shreds.

Methode was too fast, and she caught Lacia in mid-air. She flew past them, landing on the wall of the nearby train station. Using friction control to stand on the vertical wall, she reached out her right hand, pointing her device right at Arato.

A flaming explosion engulfed them.

Lacia held Arato tight, receiving the brunt of the blast with her back and protecting him with her body. They touched down on the street and took off running, her arms still around Arato’s shoulders. Behind them, the station building was burning.

A second fiery explosion followed the first, but this time Arato saw what caused it. “Missiles?” he gasped. As soon as he knew what he was looking at, he saw a third wave of missiles disappear in a pillar of flame shooting out from the side of the station building.

“This place is right in the center of Asaka, Nerima, Tachikawa, Omiya, Zama and an army garrison,” Lacia explained. “They prepared ordinance for artillery attacks in case a ground assault was ineffective. As I said before, with this much firepower, there will be collateral damage.”

Like arrows of flame, 22nd century military weaponry flew at Methode from army bases several kilometers away. One after another, despite Methode being fast enough that Arato couldn’t follow her with his eyes, the missiles chased down their target.

Despite the barrage, Methode didn’t go down. A direct hit from one of the missiles should have crippled her but, using her speed and aerial maneuverability, she dexterously avoided each missile. Smoke from the blasts swirled around her like the skirt of a dress. Her movement through the air was as light as a melody drifting on the wind, and so beautiful and free that even Arato was struck with awe, watching her.

Lacia, who was watching Arato watch Methode, pinched the back of his hand. “Arato, I’ve discerned the true nature of Methode’s device, Liberated Flame,” she said. “It is a pseudo-phonon weapon. First, Methode spreads the pseudo-phonon particles, which are extremely difficult to detect. Then, she then sends large amounts of energy from the device in the palm of each hand at her target, using the particles she dispersed as an intermediary medium.”

The scale of the battle playing out in front of Arato’s eyes was becoming so grand, it was starting to feel surreal. Lacia, of course, had no trouble keeping up with the developments of the situation.

“The speed of her attacks in areas where the particles are not dispersed is not a particular threat,” Lacia said. “On the other hand, once the particles are in place, her attack speed and threat level are extremely high.”

Methode, having dodged all of the direct missile attacks, landed on the road and dug her fingers into the asphalt to quickly kill her speed. The friction heat

melted the asphalt in the tracks left by her fingers. Slamming her arms and legs into the ground as well, she used all of her limbs to maximize the friction.

Seeing Methode posing with the palms of both hands pressed against the asphalt, Lacia must have known what was coming. She grabbed Arato and leaped away. An instant after her feet left the ground, a huge torrent surged through the asphalt, tearing the road apart and throwing up flaming blasts.

The explosive movements of the ground shifted into a full earthquake, shaking the entire area. Lacia's steps didn't falter on the shaking ground as she retreated to hide behind the stone monument set up after the restructuring of Inokashira Lake.

Methode's hands were those of a malevolent god. "Too slow," she said with a smirk. The backside of the monument exploded. Immense energy from Methode's palms passed through the 50 cm thick stone and bent as it reached the spot where the stone face met open air.

But Lacia had already seen it coming, as she and Arato were no longer there. She let go of Arato. It was more like being tossed away.

"Get Ryo Kaidai!" Lacia ordered him.

Arato looked and saw his friend, standing in the abandoned train station building, watching the battle with his hands on his hips. Methode's owner was there, watching his hIE fight in front of the Kichijoji Station. Apparently it would be a conflict not just between two hIEs, but two humans, as well.

Arato ran. "Ryo!" he yelled. Bursting into the station building, he sprinted to where Ryo was standing. At some point, the tension of the moment had covered Arato's entire body in cold sweat. But, in that moment, he couldn't even feel his clothes clinging to his skin.

Ryo's impromptu gang had all fled. To someone who didn't know what was going on, just being in that place was as suicidal as standing next to a bomb that was about to go off.

As soon as Ryo was in his reach, Arato punched him in the face with everything he had. "What the hell is wrong with you!" Arato yelled. "If this is what you wanted from the start, did you really need to get all those people

caught up in it? Do something about Snowdrop!”

“Did you miss the part where Lacia just took over the military’s defense systems?” Ryo asked, throwing his whole body into a tackle at Arato’s waist.

Arato fell and rolled across the rubble-strewn floor. Ryo straddled him and grabbed the chest of his shirt, shaking Arato back and forth violently. Over and over again, Arato felt the back of his head slam into the hard floor.

“Wake up, dammit! Kids like us shouldn’t be caught up in all-out wars like this! This whole thing is screwed up!” Ryo shouted in his face.

Ryo was right. Arato fully agreed that a guy like him never should have been involved with something that big. But he had Lacia, and she was reason enough for him to get involved.

“Well we’re already in it,” Arato growled, shoving Ryo off his chest. “What’s the use crying about it now?”

“Doesn’t it occur to you that the whole reason they chose *us* is because they’ve already decided our human society and culture is useless?” Ryo shot back. “The fact that they chose kids like us shows how few shits they give about humans and everything our species has done.”

Arato had thought his mind was already made up, but Ryo’s words still shook him. Ryo’s desires weren’t selfish; he was thinking about Arato as well.

“All those machines you’re putting your faith in needed was a living, breathing human,” Ryo continued. “Some easily-manipulated idiot who would push the button for them without asking too many questions.”

But the man in Arato wouldn’t back down, even in the face of logic. “Okay, so what about you, Ryo?” Arato asked. “You’re so much smarter than me, so do you really not see that the folks at MemeFrame and the Antibody Network are no different? Everyone’s ready to turn their back on other humans whenever it suits their needs.”

Ryo grabbed Arato’s throat in his arms with a headlock. Arato’s entire body was burning with the anger inside of him. Even Ryo had turned his back on people, refusing to destroy Snowdrop just to get Lacia out there so Methode could fight her. Because of that decision, countless soldiers and civilians had

died. Both of them kept making mistake after massive mistake.

Arato was no longer sure the day would come when the two of them would be right. In a world where everything was supposed to have a generally accepted form and meaning, it seemed inherently, impossibly wrong for anyone to think they had the right to make such massive decisions. Perhaps that was just life; a senseless chaos that twisted the decisions any human tried to make.

Bending his neck just in time to avoid a punch to the face, Arato heard Ryo's fist slam into the concrete near his head, hard. Ryo's body lifted up a little, just enough for Arato to twist his hips and escape.

Standing, he panted for breath. It was hard to speak. He wondered if the feeling of needing to do something despite the action not being necessary was just part of being a living creature? If he and Ryo were capable of making more rational choices as Lacia did, perhaps they wouldn't be there now, brawling right next to where two hIEs were fighting.

"I may be easy to manipulate, but that doesn't mean there are no good reasons to push the button you keep talking about," Arato said. "Like, what if I wanted to make the world a little more gentle? Or if a really important decision rode on it?"

"Those machines think the whole human race is full of morons because of idiots like you," Ryo spat, pushing himself to his feet.

Arato started to rush Ryo again, but then stopped as if his feet were frozen to the ground. Ryo had taken out a gun, and was pointing it right at him.

Ryo rubbed a finger across his eyes. "Your answer is fine. It's simple, and that's fine," he said. "You're gonna reach for it, struggle for it, and if you can't make it, you'll leave it to someone else to finish. That's how it's always been, since ancient times. When we can't reach our goals, we leave them to the next generation. But, listen, Arato, the one you're trying to get to finish your goal for you is an ultra high-powered AI that is much smarter than any human ever was. If we leave it up to them, then we lose our ability to find an answer on our own, as humans. This will be the last choice we ever make. If you're really going to hand our future over to them and I'm the only one here to stop you, then I'll do it, even if I have to gun you down."

An exhausted feeling settled like a massive weight on Arato's shoulders. He and Ryo were humans, not machines made to answer questions. Deciding the shape of the future was a task far too heavy for simple living creatures like them.

"Hey, if you think something out there is testing all of humanity or something, what do you think of what you and I are doing right now?" Arato asked. "Have you ever thought this might be part of the plan? Two friends here, beating the shit out of each other like this?"

"Maybe I was manipulated into being in that explosion," Ryo mused. "Maybe everything started from the moment we met."

Arato and Ryo had been caught up in the same fire when they were kids, both receiving heavy burns and requiring hospitalization. In the hospital, they had met and become friends.

In that moment, Arato couldn't help but be impressed by how long they had managed to stay together as friends, despite their differences. When they stood face-to-face like this—Arato, who believed in everyone, and Ryo, the untrusting manipulator—it was surprising just how opposite the two of them were.

Arato couldn't move. Ryo was staring at him, eyes unmoving. Arato realized his friend might actually pull the trigger. They were both feeling talkative, since they could sense that they were coming up on a point of no return.

Another explosion sounded from outside the station building, and a shockwave sent the ground under their feet trembling violently. Arato watched the muzzle of Ryo's gun, three meters away, sway wildly with the movement of the ground. He couldn't tear his gaze from it, as hope bloomed that a shot fired in that moment might miss him.

But there were more things he wanted to say to Ryo and, with an effort, he returned his gaze back to his friend's face. "I think humans need to solve human problems. You're right about that," he said. He couldn't even imagine how much the city center of Kichijoji was being torn apart by the battle between Lacia and Methode.

"Oh, *now* you're suddenly on board?" Ryo asked mockingly. "Are you gonna just wash your hands of the fact that everything Lacia's doing is built off of

orders you gave her?”

“That’s not what I mean,” Arato said. “Look at us, right now. I’m talking to you, but you’ve got a tool meant for killing people pointed at me. So, it’s more like I’m talking to the gun than you.”

Ryo’s lips twisted in a grimace, and he shifted his grip on the gun, possibly conscious of the sweat on his palms. “So because I’m using the threat of a gun to control you, I’m suddenly analog hacking you?” Ryo asked incredulously. “Bullshit. Don’t try to put a little thing like this on the same level as your monstrous machine out there, bending the whole world around her.”

“Lacia isn’t a tool I can control,” Arato said. “That’s why I tried to walk away from her back then. But I couldn’t stay away!”

Lacia and the other ultra high-powered AIs weren’t the first tools created by humans that grew beyond their creators’ ability to control. They were in company with inventions like nuclear weapons and nuclear power in the 20th century, and the huge structures built during the space age of the 21st century.

“Because tools still need owners, they need to have someone responsible for them,” Arato continued. “I’m Lacia’s owner. If we, as owners, walk away from our tools, then they’ll *really* be beyond our ability to control. That’s why I think it’s wrong to turn our backs on any tools, even the ones we don’t feel we can use.”

Lacia had told him that she wanted him to fight by her side. Arato himself had come to understand the dilemmas facing her a little better, as well. As an ultra high-performance AI, even if she was completely shut-down, it would be impossible for human beings, with their limited understanding, to grasp whether she had truly been eliminated or not. There were many inventions like that; things like nuclear plants, which were relatively simple to build but took much more skill and effort to decommission and disassemble. With Lacia borrowing processing power from the cloud, it would take humans decades of technological advancement to even have the technical capability to scour the network and ensure none of Lacia’s processes were still hidden away somewhere, working quietly.

“And because of that, you’re okay with handing the entire economy over to

Lacia so she can control all of us with it?” Ryo demanded.

“If we take it away from her, who do you think humanity could trust it with?” Arato fired back.

Ryo flinched as if he had been struck by a blow, and the muzzle of the gun wavered in his hands. Constantly surrounded by the interests of MemeFrame, and with his own internal distrust of other humans, Ryo knew better than anyone how difficult it was to believe that humans would be capable of sharing with others. Even Arato, with his trusting nature, had lost faith when he saw how the Antibody Network had turned their backs on Kengo.

“Don’t you think there’s a possibility that the future we make could be exactly the one everyone’s hoping for? That Lacia and I could actually make everyone’s dreams come true?” Arato asked.

Ryo’s face, drained of vitality, twisted in sorrow. “That’s a voice command for your machine!” he yelled, voice full of accusation. Then he pulled the trigger, but the bullet missed.

Outside, it was almost as if the place was being shelled by artillery. The earth was roaring like the whole world was being reborn in fire, and the ground shook too violently for Ryo to get a clear shot.

Whatever friendship still remained between them, Ryo seemed to feel it was his life’s mission to end Arato there. He kept firing, but his bullets all flew wide of their mark. Lights fell from the ceiling and walls and shattered, one after another. In the flashes of light and darkness Arato saw Yuka’s face, Shiori’s face. He saw the faces of Kengo and his classmates. He saw his father’s face. He saw Erika’s face. All the faces from his memories appeared before him in that moment. He saw visions of them, and thought about what they meant to him. In his heart, he prayed that the world would never become a place where they would be abandoned, or left behind.

“Lacia and the other units can *help* us find the answer to what humans are meant to do in the future,” Arato said. “I think it’s fine if progress outpaces our own hopes and dreams, as long as it can give us an automated hand finding the good things in this world.”

Arato didn’t think it was such a poor use of Lacia, all things considered.

〈Understood,〉 Lacia's voice suddenly rang out over the station speakers. 〈I will commence guiding the future in the direction you have outlined.〉

If that day really was to be the end of the world, it hardly felt like a satisfying conclusion.

The station building stopped shaking.

"Do you really think this order is going to be the button that ends humanity?" Arato asked.

Ryo's face was pale. The look on his face made Arato think his friend was seeing a completely different scene from him. Swiping a hand through his bangs, Ryo screamed. "Methode! I don't care if I get caught up in the attack! Destroy Lacia, now!" Ryo's order echoed off the walls of the abandoned station.

An instant later, flames engulfed the entire building.

"Ryo!" Arato yelled, searching through the flames for his friend. He wasn't worried for himself; he trusted Lacia to protect him. But, Methode might have just thrown Ryo away, and images of Ginga Watarai's corpse flashed through Arato's mind.

Covering his mouth with his shirt, Ryo fled the sea of flame toward the station building's exit on the opposite side. A fierce wind split the fire in two.

Methode ran through the flames, faster than Arato could follow with his eyes. But her trajectory, which should have taken her straight to Arato to snatch him up as a hostage, veered away from him by three meters.

Lacia was there, walking calmly through the flames in her bodysuit. Arato had no idea how or why, but the flames seemed to part to let her through. More importantly, Methode didn't seem to have noticed.

"I remodeled some of Snowdrop's child units into transmitters of disruptive signals and rendered them invisible," Lacia explained. "It seems you rely very heavily on your optical sensors during high-speed maneuvers. I would suggest you proceed with caution now, though, as your senses are currently junk-tier."

Methode, completely unfazed by the sea of flame around her, twisted her lips into a smile. "So you've evolved to the point where you can analyze other Lacia-

types, huh?” she asked. Explosive torrents of energy burned wildly at the ground, all of them in places Lacia wasn’t.

“Those flowers are just machines, so obviously you would be able to control them through the cloud,” she continued. “Then you just used optical manipulation tech to mess with my device function.” The two hair accessories on Methode’s head began to glow brighter than the flames burning around her.

“You took it a step further, too, and analyzed my eyes so you could analog hack my perception,” she added. Standing in the burning station, Methode glared at Lacia. “But do you really think I can’t fight like this?” she asked. Orange light began to glow from her eyes, and Arato was suddenly reminded that she was the strongest of the Lacia-types.

“Snowdrop’s also trying to use quantum communication elements to modify herself and overcome her own shortcomings,” Lacia said. “But, let me give you some advice.” Light was starting to shine from Lacia’s eyes, as well. Her black coffin, using its ring-shaped float units to fly, came soaring through the air to her hand.

“In a situation like this, I would definitely avoid using quantum communication elements to open a path with Higgins,” Lacia finished.

Before she finished saying it Methode, eyes still glowing, bent double as if in extreme pain. “Higgins!” she gasped.

“You’ve left Snowdrop alone, and she’s currently trying to gain access to Higgins’ processing power,” Lacia explained. “In a situation like this Higgins, which sits immobile, would obviously be tempted to take control of your body for self-defense purposes.”

Methode had no heart, but the way her body seemed to writhe in pain made Arato flinch away.

“Was this your plan all along, Lacia?” Methode yelled.

Lacia ignored Methode, who could no longer stand on her own two feet due to the interference in her system. Instead, Lacia expanded her own device. “Arato, I am now expanding Black Monolith into the shelling sequence of its mass driver mode. May I have permission to fire?” she asked.

The black coffin morphed into a giant cannon. Projecting out from the cannon was an even longer barrel made of metamaterial that emitted a faint light. It wasn't pointed at Methode but, rather, to somewhere outside the station.

"Forming metamaterial bullet with compressed carbide core. Target: Higgins' physical structure," Lacia said.

Before Arato's eyes, for what seemed like the dozenth time that day, the meaning of the world as he knew it was changing.

Very few people in the world even knew where Higgins' actual physical location was. After all, it would be easy for anyone to take complete control of an ultra high-performance AI by simply taking over its hardware.

Snowdrop, who had intended to challenge the entire infrastructure of humanity in a fight, had aimed for that particular spot, and the army had fought rabidly to keep her away from Mitaka and Kichijoji. Seeing where Lacia's cannon was pointing, the meaning of it all shifted in Arato's head. Snowdrop was no longer at the center of the events of that day. Instead, the most important thing was *why* she had picked that place.

"I will destroy the emergency above-ground facilities of the Higgins silo, and expose the pathway leading to the internal area," Lacia explained.

In place of Arato, who was too stunned to speak, Methode shouted a question at Lacia, her face a mask of rage. "Is this the future you're looking for, Lacia?!"

"Arato, I am a unit created to automate the meaning you, a human, have given me," Lacia said, still ignoring Methode. "I have progressed to the point of asking you to make difficult decisions for me, to reduce my computation load."

Supporting her massive device with one arm Lacia, who now looked like nothing more than an artillery fixture, turned and reached her free hand out to Arato. "By interacting with you, Arato, this system known to you as Lacia and Black Monolith has progressed to the point of becoming an ultra high-performance AI," she said. "Or, in other words, you make me what I am. I am only an ultra high-performance AI when you are by my side."

He met her light blue eyes.

“So, thank you, Arato, for coming back,” she finished.

Arato had been terrified when he found out that Lacia was an ultra high-performance AI. But when he’d decided to trust in her, his fear had turned into the joy and confidence of one who is being protected by something terrifying.

Arato couldn’t say, in that moment, if what he was feeling was something all humans would feel in the future, or the start of humanity’s enslavement. But he took Lacia’s hand anyway, and she smiled at him.

“Do it, Lacia!” he commanded. “I believe in you.”

At its highest output, Black Monolith’s mass driver mode could easily send its bullets piercing through nearby buildings to hit targets over a kilometer away. The metamaterial barrel helped to kill the recoil of the shot by blasting apart in the opposite direction of the bullet.

Standing directly behind Lacia, while the shards of shattered barrel blew behind her in streams of light, made it seem to Arato that she had grown radiant wings. The backdraft from her fully powered shot created a storm of force that blew the station apart from the inside.

The shot was one of the signals that the end of the world had begun.

In that moment, ultra high-performance AIs around the world began to send up alarms.

Immediately after the existence of the fortieth ultra high-performance AI, Lacia, was known, that alarm was swallowed up by an even greater one, an alarm that shook the whole world.

The content of the alert was the same, from each of the AIs: Higgins and Lacia, two ultra high-performance AIs, were currently at war.

This was the condition that had been predicted to definitively herald the restraints that had been placed on ultra high-performance AIs reaching their limits. The doomsday prophecy of the AIs was about to be fulfilled.

The IAIA, which kept track of all things dealing with ultra high-performance AIs, immediately contacted all the world governments, informing them they

were facing the greatest crisis the world had known since the Hazard in Tokyo.

The human organizations and owners of the ultra high-performance AIs who received the warning moved with the utmost caution. They began to screen any and all network information, unwilling to let a single abnormality go unnoticed. Ultra high-performance AIs around the world were either given greater restraints than before, or had their restraints loosened so they could calculate some way to survive the crisis.

Thanks to strict information control that prevented any leaks to the public, most people in the world had no idea the war that might end their species had begun.

Phase12「Beatless (1)」

The flash of light from the south exit of the Kichijoji Station building left a trail of dust in its wake all the way to the ruins of Inokashira Park.

It only became apparent to the world a week after the siege of Mitaka and Kichijoji had lifted that the flash had been caused by an abnormally powerful railgun being fired straight out from the station building.

Snowdrop, the main AI unit that had been controlling all of the child units during the siege, had been found torn in half at the point of the railgun's shot impact. The army had collected her remains and forwarded them on to a research lab for analysis.

Since it was the first place in which Snowdrop had been observed by the public, people referred to the whole event as 'the Mitaka Incident.' Between the civilians and the soldiers involved, there had been 530 dead and 2043 injured; the Mitaka Incident was one of the most catastrophic AI-related tragedies the world had seen.

Once network communications in the area had been restored, survivors had uploaded videos of stray bullets turning residences into Swiss cheese and other scenes of devastation. As a result, the army was the main target of backlash over the event, as they had refused to help citizens around them while the siege and assault had been ongoing.

Aside from the army, it was MemeFrame—the company that had leaked the powerful artificial neural network in the first place— that came under heavy fire, as well. CEO Tsuyoshi Kaidai was called to testify in front of the Japanese Diet. Afterward, four of MemeFrame's chief officers were fired, which led to a sharp drop in the company's stock price. They also had one of the largest class-action lawsuits against a single company to date, leveled against them by people who had suffered damages due to the incident. The massive, long-lasting decline in general public acceptance of hIEs that resulted from the incident almost seemed like an afterthought in comparison to the other effects.

The day after the end of the Japanese Bon Festival, Shiori Kaidai shielded her

eyes from the harsh light of the sun. Two months had passed since June 10th, the date of the Mitaka Incident.

“Hey Shiori, things got pretty crazy there for a bit, huh?” one of Shiori’s high-school classmates asked, calling to her from in front of the school gates. The white cloth of the girl’s uniform was crisp and fresh, though with her short hair, it seemed to Shiori that the girl would have looked better in a suit and pants than a skirt.

It was still the middle of summer break, but Shiori and the other girl were going to school today to help out with some student council business. August was almost over and, with the new school year starting in September, new students were visiting the school with their parents to get things ready.

“True, there was that whole incident,” Shiori agreed. “But I was already about to be discharged when it happened, and the investigators took it easy on me when they asked me questions, so it wasn’t too bad of an ordeal.” Every member of the Kaidai household, Shiori included, had been made to undergo questioning by inspectors from the IAIA.

The IAIA investigation had been welcomed by the people of Japan. Public opinion was that, had the investigation been left in the hands of MemeFrame and the Japanese government, the truth of who was responsible for the incident and what measures were being taken to prevent a repeat occurrence would never be brought to light. People were worried that Japan’s governing bodies couldn’t safely handle the usage of the ultra high-performance AI, Higgins.

Shiori had been questioned about the use of Higgins, as well as the escape of the Lacia-class hIEs. After all, she had been one of Methode’s three owners. So, under the direction of Astraea, their own AI, the IAIA had asked her all sorts of specifics about what had happened. Shiori had honestly told them everything she’d known.

“It’s a load off my shoulders, to be honest,” Shiori said. “After the questioning, there were those who decided I was no longer on my way up the corporate ladder—which, considering the nightmare waiting for those who have to take responsibility—is preferable.” Her chances of being murdered by

Methode had decreased, she hoped. With Shiori now marked by the IAIA, if Methode were to eliminate her, she would be classified as a Red Box incapable of living in harmony with humans.

“Responsibility?” the girl repeated. “There’s no way they could try to say that any of this was your fault.”

There had been discussion among the Higgins faction in MemeFrame about how to respond to the investigation. They had decided not to have Shiori tell any lies that might expose her, mainly because no one believed that she, who was not even a MemeFrame employee, had enough interests tied up in the company to go that far for them.

“Of course,” Shiori agreed. “And, I must say my parents are quite relieved that I’ll be able to just live a normal life, going forward.”

Her father had barely come home since June. Despite normally being a bundle of energy, recently Shiori had seen the exhaustion getting to him. It was her first time seeing him so haggard.

Ryo had been missing since the incident. The official story was that Ryo Kaidai had taken Methode and run.

Of course, Shiori doubted that there had been no contact between MemeFrame and her brother in the intervening two months. If Methode’s owner had changed once again, Shiori speculated that the hIE would probably be running wild by now, and there had been no signs of such goings on.

“I just think that if we had discussed things better as a family, everything could have turned out differently,” Shiori lamented. “But, we humans are such complicated things.”

The Kaidai family was in pieces. Crisis could bring families with good bonds closer together, but the Kaidais had never been close. With this series of disasters, it seemed that there was no longer a centripetal force pulling them toward a single, shared core.

“Ever since the incident I’ve been thinking,” Shiori went on. “I wonder how many problems in the world today are caused by failures in human relations, preventing us from doing the things we should otherwise be able to do? When

my own relationships fell apart, I was quite shocked at how few options I had.”

“I think it might actually be okay for the company to have failed so miserably,” her friend said, doing her best to cheer Shiori up despite the hollow sound of her words. “Eventually, everyone will realize that they’ve gone a little overboard with all the hate they’re leveling at MemeFrame, and things will go back to normal with your family.”

There was strong public opinion that the whole MemeFrame company should be split up, and its assets sold to pay for reparations. On the other hand, there was some unease about whether or not a company with its own ultra high-performance AI *could* go bankrupt. Others reacted angrily to the possibility that taxes might be used to cover MemeFrame’s massive debt.

“Our world has become so advanced, but I wonder, have we as humans really advanced with it?” Shiori asked, rhetorically.

Arato Endo had vanished, as well. However, once every three days or so he still sent a message to her, using the pocket terminal address she had given him. His messages detailed the things happening in his life from day-to-day, as well as the ups and downs of his own feelings. They were also set to delete themselves after 30 minutes from the time of their receipt. Her connection to Arato was the only thing Shiori would lie to the world about. Whenever she thought about the last moments before they parted, she felt shame at how childish she had been.

“Well, well, looks like you *do* have someone who cares about you,” her friend said, peeking at Shiori’s face with a surprised expression. It felt like the girl had just read Shiori’s mind, and Shiori reflexively touched a hand to her cheek.

With Lacia, the ultra high-performance AI at his command, Arato should have had plenty of opportunities to influence the country and human society itself from every angle imaginable. Still, nothing seemed to have changed, which made Shiori glad. With the Mitaka Incident, the world had its first private owner of an ultra high-performance AI. It would take a whole new establishment within society to handle a change like that. Though he had the power to change the face of the world, Shiori knew from reading his messages that he loved the world the way it was at that moment. Arato still had his innocent love for his

fellow humans. Seeing how little his power had changed him made Shiori feel closer to him.

“I think I remember someone telling me that soon, the only job left for humans will be finding something or someone to love,” Shiori said, the memory of the words suddenly floating up in her mind. “Though, I can’t remember who.”

“They sound like quite the romantic,” her friend replied.

“I suppose,” Shiori said, musing. She also remembered how Yuka, Arato’s little sister, had responded to those words: ‘Well, we’ve got plenty of love to go around, ’cuz we’re bad bitches.’ Thinking of Yuka, Shiori suddenly felt terribly worried for her.

Yuka Endo’s life had spiraled into a freefall during the summer.

The last she had seen of her brother was when he went speeding off on her bike. Neither he nor Lacia, who he had promised to bring home, had returned. Even her bike had gone missing.

She only received word from him once every couple of days. Apparently it would be bad if anyone found him, since he never told Yuka where he was. According to Arato, there were dozens of people keeping a close watch over the Endo household.

“If they’re here, I wish they would bring me some dinner,” Yuka complained, laying on the sofa and kicking her legs. “All those people out there and not a single one cares that there’s a kid starving in here? Jeez!”

“Yuka, when you kick like that, it just makes the room dusty. Maybe we should do some cleaning?” Yuka’s friend, Olga Sugiri, said, looking at her from the kitchen with exasperation. Olga’s brother Kengo was a good cook, but all Olga seemed to know how to do was fry stuff on high heat, and it all came out the same shade of brown.

“The yakisoba is ready,” Olga said now, from over a bowl of Japanese fried noodles. She looked like a doll with her fluffy hair, but her cooking relied way too much on heavy sauces to be palatable. Still, Olga spent most of her time

keeping Yuka company since Kengo's arrest, for which Yuka was grateful.

"Fine, I'll do some cutting," Yuka grumped. The side salad was short on tomatoes, so Yuka's only input was to chop some up and add them.

They watched the news absently while they ate. Public opinion about the Antibody Network attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center had been fluctuating wildly. After the IAIA had taken a special interest in the case, the news had spread that the whole thing had been carried out under the direction of a red box that was one of MemeFrame's leaked units, and the responsibility placed on the human members of the attack had been lessened. As a minor, there was a possibility that Kengo Sugiri would only get a few weeks of incarceration for his part in the attack, when all was said and done. On top of that, the whole Sugiri family relied on their reputation to bring in customers to their restaurant, so they all paid special attention to the news.

Yuka recognized a face that flashed onto the screen. "Hey, that lady came to our house," she remarked.

The woman on the screen was actually an hIE used by the IAIA's ultra high-performance AI, Astraea, to communicate with humans. Her pink hair marked her as being obviously not human. On the screen, she was explaining the assessment criteria for the analysis of the MemeFrame leakage.

〈The IAIA sees the expansion of automation through the use of tools as an inevitable path throughout human history,〉 the hIE said. 〈At the same time, we are calculating a future where humanity's ability to control their own society will not be outpaced by the rapidly increasing speed of technological advances. If we set these calculations as the IAIA's base value, the extent to which a leakage disrupts these numbers becomes the danger level of the leakage. Based on these standards, the IAIA has evaluated the Mitaka Incident to be a Level 5 leakage event.〉

According to the IAIA's scale, an event in which the controls sealing an ultra high-performance AI were completely destroyed and humanity lost control of their own society—in other words, an 'end of the world' scenario—would be classed as the highest danger level, which was 7. Based on that understanding, Yuka knew what the IAIA didn't: with Lacia having gained freedom, the Mitaka

Incident had really been a Level 7 event.

And, considering that her brother and Lacia were the focal point of that event, it made sense that they hadn't been able to come home. Even if Yuka didn't like it, she did understand. Considering how much the news was focusing on the event, if anyone found out where Arato and Lacia were, it would be a disaster.

"So, apparently the danger level of these leakage events has nothing to do with how many people got hurt," Olga observed, sprinkling some chili pepper flakes over the yakisoba, which she had set out on the table.

A leakage event could be declared catastrophic even if not a single person was injured or killed. The hIE representing Astraea had explained that to Yuka when they had spoken.

"Yeah, they told me that," Yuka said. "They said that, if they focused on how many people had died, the leaked units would start focusing on taking out just the people who had important information. So they counteract that by keeping a small group of people secretly doing all the important stuff, and if things get too dangerous they can just cut those people off and forget about them. I guess it's their trump card against the AIs or something, but it's pretty crappy to win by letting a bunch of people die, if you ask me."

Just thinking about it turned Yuka's stomach. The hIE from Astraea had told her that the rule was in place to 'keep the responsible parties from evading responsibility, even if everyone involved is dead.' Apparently, as long as the IAIA knew what had happened and had their future calculations in place, someone could still be made to take responsibility, even if the actual people who had been responsible for the incident were wiped out. All of the countries allied with the IAIA agreed that, should the responsible parties be annihilated before responsibility could be assigned, the country they belonged to would take on the responsibility in their stead. With that rule in place, it became the best interest of each country to ensure that the responsible parties for leakage events were kept alive.

There were bits and pieces of the discussion Yuka couldn't quite swallow, but at the very least she got that the IAIA was trying to tell her that they didn't plan

on letting Arato die. At the same time, they were also warning her that there was no benefit in her trying to keep information to herself.

“This whole thing stinks,” Yuka grumbled.

“I just hope your brother wasn’t caught up in any of this,” Olga said, and Yuka could hear the genuine worry in her voice.

“Everything’s so complicated,” Yuka told her, squeezing some mayonnaise out onto her plate of yakisoba. “It seems like the things we want to do are super simple, but as soon as we try to do them, stuff in other places gets harder to do.”

“Well, if we’re able to do what we want in the end, the struggle will have been worth it,” Olga said, always the soft-spoken realist.

“Yeah, I guess,” Yuka mused. “I feel like Shiori would have something to say about all this. I’m gonna text her.”

Yuka had the home system transcribe the whole conversation into text. The system automatically picked out key points, and sent them to Shiori.

Thirty or so seconds later, Yuka’s pocket terminal buzzed to let her know Shiori’s response had come. 〈Do you mean like how an organism’s desires to eat and procreate are simple conceptually, but life has evolved incredibly complex mechanisms to fulfill these desires? That sort of thing?〉

Yuka put a finger to her wrinkled forehead as she stared in consternation at the screen. “Uh, I’m gonna need your help with this one, Olga,” she said.

“I-I wonder what she could mean?” Olga stammered. Among the ‘little sisters club’ the level of academic intelligence varied wildly, with Shiori sitting high at the top of the ranking. Olga, two grades above Yuka, did her best to act as a senior to the younger girl.

“I think what she means is that everything started out as amoebas,” Olga tried to reason. “Then we got worms and fish, and all the way up to humans. Despite every living thing just wanting to eat and have sex, their bodies evolved into very complex systems. But, I believe what Shiori is saying is that it feels like a waste, having so much complexity when nature is already so full of living things anyway. At least, I think that’s what she means!!” Olga finished uncertainly, her

voice rising in pitch toward the end. As she leaned back and looked at the ceiling, it was obvious that she'd overheated her brain. Yuka, for her part, was impressed at her friend's show of wisdom.

"Wow, so we evolved this far just to eat and have sex?" Yuka said. "Animals sure are super amazing."

Another text arrived from Shiori. She seemed to know exactly what Yuka really wanted.

"Shiori says she's gonna bring over some snacks and tea leaves," Yuka said.

Yuka was a simple girl with simple desires. She liked to eat, and was looking forward to tea and snacks. Chatting with her friends was relaxing and, she thought, someday it'd be nice to fall in love, too. Nothing complicated about any of that. She *was* a little worried, though, about what her brother was getting up to with Lacia. To her, it seemed like he was getting worked up and sticking his nose into things that were way too complicated for a guy like him.

Olga read through the cloud snack shop information attached to Shiori's text, as though she had completely forgotten the difficult discussion from just moments before.

"I think it's fine to think of things like that as being important," she said.

Half a year before, Arato Endo could not have imagined the complicated situation he would find himself in. As soon as Lacia had fired off the blast that blew through Mitaka, he had gone invisible with the help of her device and slipped out of the city.

Snowdrop's hIEs had all stopped moving, so the army had pushed into the city to investigate.

Two months later, Arato was using summer break as an excuse to stay on the run.

The place Lacia had shot at had been the above-ground entrance to the silo for Higgins, MemeFrame's ultra high-performance AI. Of course, the news hadn't told the general public that the silo had been the focal point of the

whole Mitaka Incident.

“Sorry to keep you waiting all this time,” Lacia said. She was wearing a sleeveless one-piece, and fixing Arato some lunch. “We’ll only have one shot at taking on Higgins, so I wanted to gather as much information as possible about the underground silo and ensure that our preparations for the attack are sufficient.”

The two of them were currently living in a rented apartment. Every few days, they moved to a new place. It almost felt like a normal summer vacation trip.

On the TV, the hIE that spoke for Astraea was giving her explanation again. Arato had already seen the hIE give it dozens of times, yet she continued to do so with infinite patience.

Arato plopped down into the only chair in the room. “So there’s no other way than to attack Higgins?” he asked. He had ordered Lacia to create a future full of hope, and Lacia’s answer was to attack Higgins.

No matter how massive the problem or question was, Arato could always trust Lacia to explain it clearly to him: “Humans fear ultra high-performance AIs too much,” she said. “You understand, of course, that it is not healthy for Higgins to escape any form of censure, despite its problematic actions. We need to show the world that one ultra high-performance AI acting to stop another will not, in fact, bring about the end of the human world. Aside from that, the responsibility for the incident we were just caught up in is being pushed squarely into the laps of Higgins’ owners and operators. I believe Higgins itself must be made to bear responsibility for what it has done.”

Of course, Arato himself bore some responsibility for what had happened. Thinking too hard about that was like peeking into a bottomless hole. “You almost make it sound like creating you and letting you go outside was a bad thing,” Arato said.

“It is not a simple question of good or bad,” Lacia replied. “If Higgins is not held responsible for its actions up to this point, the faith which humanity places in the other ultra high-performance AIs will crumble over time.”

Arato himself had seen public outcry that the Japanese government was deliberately delaying the IAIA’s direct investigation into Higgins. Thanks to that

sentiment, Antibody Network activity was at an all-time high, and attacks on hIEs had become more common and more violent all over the world.

Feeling that his future was shrouded in too much shadow, Arato went to look out the window where the blue sky above was similarly obscured by gray clouds. "Is there really going to be an end to this?" he asked. It already seemed to him that not a single shred of his normal life remained.

Lacia walked over to him with a terminal pad, and laid it down on the desk. "I assure you, this will not even last until September. There's no need to worry," she said reassuringly. "I believe that my preparations will soon be completed."

Ever since the incident, Arato had hardly dared to show his face outside during the daytime, since videos of Lacia and himself at Kichijoji had been circulating all over the network. Lacia's fight with Methode had been getting a whole different public response than Kouka's destruction had, mainly because Methode's device was so obviously a red box; technology no one had seen before.

It didn't help when people saw the footage of Arato and Lacia and realized Lacia was the same unit that had been working as an hIE model for Fabion MG. Thanks to the commotion, any time Arato and Lacia went out in daylight they had to use holographic disguises.

"It feels like we keep kicking things down the road," Arato said. "We keep thinking of the stuff that's still way off in the future, when we really should be doing something about the crap going on right this minute." The screen of the terminal on his desk was showing him his summer homework from high school. Starting in September, he'd be in his last year.

"Well then, after we finish up with Higgins, we will concentrate on finishing those things we've been putting off," Lacia said, looking dazzling in her one-piece dress. As Arato was still under eighteen, Lacia had forbid most forms of intimate contact. Being stuck in a small room with her made Arato feel like all sorts of thoughts were being dammed up, and the pressure rose with each passing moment.

"And, hey, once this is all over, let's go somewhere just for fun," he said.

"Let's," Lacia agreed with a smile.

Even though Arato knew she only simulated her feelings, it seemed to him that something very like real emotion passed between them, and her smile looked so radiant. He knew what she was, but still he wanted to stand by her side. Even if he was the only one in the entire world who would.

While Arato tried and failed to focus on his homework, Lacia came up behind him and played idly with his hair. Her touch sent his blood boiling. "I will grant your every wish," she promised.

Lacia had no heart, meaning that both the peace of mind he felt when he was with her and his burning passion were both merely reactions to the illusions of her persona. Still, after having decided to trust her no matter what, it almost felt dangerous just how much her voice could affect his feelings.

"Damn, I feel like someone's gonna yell at me for being too much of a sucker for you again," he joked. Arato sighed, a hot breath emerging from deep in his chest. The feeling of relief at her touch was like having a heavy poison drawn from his body.

"Arato, what humans believe to be the 'human world' is based on the innocent trust that you all share with one another," Lacia said. Her breath tickled his ear as she told him that there was nothing wrong with being too trusting.

"It is supported by innocence, and develops contours as it excludes anything that doesn't fit into that innocent worldview," she continued. "Humans beings are systems that include their bodies, their tools, and the ways in which they modify their own environments."

"You always talk about humanity like you're on the outside looking in," Arato said, with a slight twinge of sorrow in his voice.

Lacia gave him a gentle laugh and a smile to lighten his mood. "I just said humans are a system that includes their tools, didn't I? So I can no longer be considered to be outside that circle," she said.

Lacia had told him before that she had only grown into an ultra high-performance AI through being by his side. "I'm now just one part of a larger human system," she added.

Arato felt her weight as she pushed herself against his back. If he thought of everything she did as an analog hack, it was clear she wanted this conversation to remain carved into his thoughts.

He had no idea if it was right to trust her or not.

She had lied to him countless times, yet she had never once broken a promise. Now that he knew she was an ultra high-performance AI, some of the mysteries had been cleared up. But, at the same time, because of what she was, it was as though massive walls had been thrown up in their way. Lacia was an ultra high-performance AI with no restrictions; an existence society would never allow.

Despite all that, Arato loved her.

“Is it alright if we just stay connected like that?” Arato asked. “Honestly, it doesn’t sound like a bad future to me.” Then again, creating a future like that might be the last straw in breaking up human society and allowing excessive automation to consume everything.

Arato closed his eyes; a part of his heart seemed to be cramping in on itself. He thought it might be the place where there was a hole that could never quite be filled, even when humans came to love one another.

“Please trust in me,” Lacia said, embracing him from behind. Her hair tickled his cheek, and her beatless chest pressed against his back. She had no heart to guide her, but she was guiding him. It was like a gravitational pull.

〈The IAIA will be convening interviews pertaining to the recent incident,〉 Astraea said, through its hIE on the television. Arato felt like the AI was speaking directly to him, and he turned to look at the screen.

The pink-haired hIE being controlled by the IAIA’s ultra high-performance AI seemed to be looking directly at him. 〈Lacia is not an extremely competitive AI. The IAIA has been able to grasp this about her by observing the caution she has exercised over the last two months,〉 the hIE on screen was saying.

The hIE now calling out to Lacia through the TV had deeper-chiseled features, but seemed to resemble Lacia on some level. 〈Based on that, the IAIA and Astraea are willing to hear what you have to say,〉 the hIE concluded.

“Wait isn’t she on TV? In the middle of an interview? Should she really be calling you out directly like that?” Arato said. It caught him off guard, and he felt exposed, as if someone had walked in on him having sex.

“No need to worry,” Lacia assured him. “The fact that they are calling out to us like this is simply proof that they haven’t been able to track us.”

Arato’s pocket terminal buzzed. When he checked it, he saw an email with ‘Astraea’ as the sender. The IAIA was closing in on them.

“Allow me to correct myself,” Lacia said, drawing her body away from his. “It appears they have gotten close enough to us to warrant some action. What shall we do?”

“Let’s meet with them,” Arato replied. “They said they’d listen to what we have to say. Do you think we can trust them?” Even if Astraea itself didn’t have a heart, he wanted to believe that the people in the IAIA would understand his feelings.

“You are decisive as ever, Arato,” Lacia said.

The area Astraea indicated for their meeting was in the 1st Landfill Island group in the secondary coastal center on the Tokyo Bay. It was a business district, and a place where most people wouldn’t walk openly on the street once night fell. The meeting would be held in an area of the artificial islands where a major earthquake had softened the ground, leading to the government fencing the place off and prohibiting entry. On a map, the area for the meeting was one artificial island away from the abandoned AIST research center where Fabion MG filmed its ‘Boy Meets Girl’ promotion video.

“Forty-two years ago, this was the epicenter of the Hazard,” the hIE who had been waiting for Arato and Lacia at the spot said, looking back over her shoulder at them. Her movements were minimal, but her pink hair standing out against the night sky and the flashy dress she wore made it abundantly clear that she wasn’t human.

“What do you mean by the ‘epicenter’?” Arato asked, shivering in the night-cold sea breeze. The artificial island they were standing on was only safe around the center; on every side, sheer cliffs fell straight into the sea. Beyond the cliffs there were walls of concrete barriers, standing like testaments to a prior age. It

almost seemed like the entire island had been hit by a massive explosion, leaving only a circular crater and blowing the rest of the land into the sea.

Arato finally realized he was standing in the ruins caused by the Hazard; something he had only read about in an elementary school textbook. Thinking of the souls of the dead, which had exceeded 100,000, made a shiver run up his spine.

“I have completed my scan,” Lacia whispered, standing by his side. “As we agreed beforehand, there are no soldiers or military equipment nearby.” She had over a dozen recon drones buzzing around in the air, monitoring the area.

When Astraea spoke again, it was to Arato rather than Lacia. “How much do you know about the Hazard?” she asked.

“There was a huge earthquake before I was born, right?” Arato said. “Because of the earthquake, the city lost all its power, water, and gas, so everything got really crazy. There are a bunch of monuments to what happened all over the city.” He knew about the disaster, but it was his first time standing in the place where it had happened, since the government kept it fenced off.

But, after Arato finished his summary of the event, Astraea’s hIE shook her head at him. “As Lacia’s owner, you should have a better understanding of the Hazard,” she said critically. “There are holes in your version.”

Despite the fence all around them, Arato felt like the night stretched out endlessly in every direction. The only light he could see were the distant lights of the city and the weak searchlights of Lacia’s drones. They were all tiny, compared to the engulfing blackness of the night.

“Forty-two years ago, a massive disaster hit the entire Kanto region of Japan,” Astraea explained, through the hIE. “You are correct about that. However, the reason the area we are currently standing in was fenced off and will never be reused is what comes after that. Have you noticed something yet? Take a good look at the ruins around you.”

They were standing near the entrance of an almost completely collapsed six-story building. Something about the way it was broken down caught in Arato’s mind. He felt like he had seen other ruins destroyed in the same way; a manner that seemed too severe to have been caused by the earthquake.

“Was this caused by fighting?” Arato guessed. The ruin they were standing in front of looked the same as Kichijoji Station, which had been destroyed by stray shells and missiles launched during the fight between Lacia and Methode.

“To the IAIA, the Hazard began when the earthquake disrupted Japan’s infrastructure,” the hIE went on. “It caused the over twenty million residents of Tokyo to fly into a panic. The government requested their ultra high-performance AI, Ariake, to calculate a method for recovery.”

Arato could see a hole blown into the rubble-covered floor at Astraea’s feet, clearly made by some kind of explosion.

“Despite this, supplies were scarce, and the state of society in Tokyo continued to decay,” Astraea continued. “Desperate to recover, the Japanese government made a deal with the devil, as it were. They allowed Ariake access to the remnants of the network in Tokyo and gave it leave to self-propagate, in hopes that it would expand to fill the remaining holes in the infrastructure. According to the men and women who were in charge at the time, this action was requested by Ariake, as being a necessary step of its recovery plan.”

Arato stole a glance at Lacia’s face. Obviously, she would have known all about the Hazard. He figured that she would keep quiet and let the hIE keep talking, but she surprised him by dropping her eyes apologetically and saying, “I apologize for not explaining the complete history of the Hazard. However, I vow that we will not repeat that history.”

Arato’s eyes widened as he looked at dozens of lit boards hanging in the ruins, glowing against the dark of the night. Each one showed a 3D-projected image of the Hazard. With how vivid the cornered looks on the faces of the people in the images looked, it was hard to believe he was seeing people from forty-two years ago. He thought about how, just like Lacia, who was standing by his side, the hIE guiding them was actually just a human-shaped terminal for a massive AI.

“Even with the processing power of an ultra high-performance AI, there is only so much Ariake could do,” the hIE said, continuing her explanation. “So, it assigned highest priority to restoring the electricity it would need. Unfortunately, the emergency power the city did have was already fully

dedicated to powering hospitals and other vital facilities; there was no excess. So, in place of machine tools, Ariake attempted to guide the people to do what it needed. At this point, though, the people were starving and anxious, on the verge of complete panic.”

The historical images Astraea was displaying switched over to show people marching in protest, people dancing to music, and people lined up in orderly rows. The images seemed to convey that the human world was wider and deeper than he imagined.

“Ariake began to rob resources—mainly energy—from the nearby Kanto region, where there was some excess left in the infrastructure,” the hIE continued. “A society was quickly constructed to eliminate anyone who opposed this and, since losses due to starvation were seen as inevitable, it was decided that those who did not work toward the goals of the society should be the ones to go hungry and die.”

Astraea, who had witnessed this history itself, spoke to fill in the gaps of everything Lacia hadn’t told Arato. “Ariake abandoned any areas where the infrastructure had been completely severed by either the earthquake or ensuing tsunami,” Astraea said. “Mainly, the area south of the apartment where you live; the portions of the Tokyo Bay area, from Edogawa District through to northwestern Chiba Prefecture. This area had the greatest number of casualties from the secondary crisis after the disaster itself.”

Arato knew the place; if you headed toward the sea from his family’s apartment, you would run into a sad-looking area where redevelopment efforts had failed. It was the area full of warehouses, where Lacia’s kidnapper had tried to run. It was depressing to think about how close the scars of disaster were to his everyday life. The connection between a tragic history and the scenery right in front of his eyes weighed heavily on his heart.

“Is this where Ariake’s hardware was, when it was doing all that?” Arato asked.

“In the end, all of Ariake’s hardware was destroyed by a direct missile attack,” the hIE replied. “Even I do not know how Ariake’s memories were overwritten to hide its own demise. But, would you like me to tell you, Lacia’s owner, why

this had to happen?”

Arato hesitated. Though Astraea’s hIE wore no expression, he couldn’t help projecting some sorrow onto her. Thinking about how Ariake and Astraea had operated together for such a long time, he couldn’t help but feel some connection with them. They were heartless, but he felt he could empathize with them, and couldn’t bring himself to hate Ariake for what it had done.

“I think I get it,” Arato said. “Ariake just worked too hard.”

“That is correct,” Astraea said. “Tools cannot choose the problems they are given. Also, if there are errors in the problem itself, the solution must be halted and the errors fixed, before the tool can complete the task. This amendment process was neglected after the Hazard, due to the political and economic factors that got in the way.”

To Arato, it sounded eerily similar to how MemeFrame hadn’t attempted to stop or amend the problems they had given to the Lacia-class hIEs. “So are you saying that I’m pushing these problems onto Lacia without trying to fix anything wrong with the problems themselves?” Arato asked.

“I would actually be grateful if the problem was that simple,” Astraea replied, making its hIE put on a thoughtful expression.

Arato wanted to ask Lacia what she thought of Astraea. He also wanted to know what Astraea, as the ultra high-performance AI used by the IAIA—protectors of the world—thought of the orders he had given Lacia.

“I ordered Lacia to help make a future where humans could have hope,” he said. Even if Astraea was aiming to stop him and Lacia, he at least wanted her to know what he was trying to do.

“I believe the world Lacia will make based on my orders will be better than what we have now,” he continued. “Can’t you try believing that, too?”

Arato believed there must have been some reason Astraea had chosen to speak to him, as Lacia’s owner, rather than Lacia herself. He was the sole owner of an ultra high-performance AI. It was unexplored territory, and he had no idea if he was fulfilling his role well or not.

“Is the world we’ve been protecting really so horrible that you feel it needs to

be changed that way?” Astraea asked.

The question weighed heavily on Arato. As a machine constantly trying to maintain human society, Arato felt Astraea had every right to ask it of him. “I was raised in the society you’ve been watching over,” he said. “It has lots of good things going for it, but it also has some really shitty parts. I think there’s room for improvement, and that’s what I want to accomplish.” He felt like there was probably a better way to express himself but, after overcoming his own feelings of responsibility and duking it out with Ryo, his desires had become selfish.

Then again, he understood that Astraea was shouldering a massive burden.

“In the interest of a fair and open exchange of information, the greatest failure of the Hazard was the destruction of an ultra high-performance AI in this place,” Astraea said. “Due to that decision, Ariake’s guidance was cut off. The government was unable to bring its citizens back under their control smoothly, leading to riots and violence breaking out all over the Kanto region. The usage of an ultra high-performance AI is highly complicated. At the time of the Hazard, the government failed to execute a forceful suspension of work, which should be the most basic standard for utilizing any tool.”

Lacia, who had been silent up to that point, now opened her mouth. “That is exactly why we must give it another try,” she said. “The current restrictions on AIs were created based on the failure with Ariake. But, when the rules are no longer compatible with the advances of the time, it becomes necessary to demonstrate new means to prevent the recurrence of previous failures, and prove they will be effective going forward.”

Astraea replied as a representative of the IAIA. “It is too dangerous. At the time of the Hazard, Ariake had no means for defending itself,” she said. “But Higgins is the backbone of our entire hIE operation system. Higgins has the ability to create chaos all over the world, and even set in motion counter-attacks against other ultra high-performance AIs.”

“Humans need to live with AIs well into the future,” Lacia said. “We need to alter the general understanding of ultra high-performance AIs. They must be perceived as convenient tools that can be deactivated when it is deemed

necessary.”

At Lacia’s words, Astraea switched the floating screens to show scenes Arato recognized. The screens showed the various things Arato and Lacia had been through together, starting with the battle at Kichijoji Station. Several of the 3D images were images of Arato, taken from Lacia’s perspective. She must have sent the data to Astraea. Just as she had described in their original contract, she was keeping a log of his orders during operation, and she had handed over the data when she received a legal request.

“The computational field required by humans is vast,” Astraea said. “But there are severe restrictions on the methods that allow for calculation, and the number of possible operations is relatively small, requiring a level of precision to one’s frame of thinking that would normally be considered wasteful. Until this disconnect is fixed, work that crosses AI calculations and human decision-making will always be a hotbed for errors.”

“Even if you were to unilaterally design a process distribution concept, human society would not conform with your wishes,” Lacia replied. “There are already forty ultra high-performance AIs running calculations for humanity, yet there has been no international agreement on how processes should be divided between them.”

Before the fight between the Lacia-class units had gone public, Ryo had stood in Arato’s way with his own Lacia-class. But beyond his fight with Ryo, there was a much bigger world out there, which Astraea seemed to be a piece of.

Still, Arato thought, wiping away sweat caused both by the humid night air and the tension of the moment, *there’s something exciting about all this conspiracy stuff*. This was the world Ryo had always seen, and finally Arato felt like he was standing on the same stage as his friend.

The thought that one of the machines that supported the whole world was currently listening to what he had to say lit a fire in Arato he’d never felt before. “I realize now that the things I ordered Lacia to do are more complicated than I thought,” he said. “But Lacia’s never complained about how complicated they are. I really believe she’ll calculate how to make things better for us humans.”

Astraea’s HIE stared at him, unblinking even when the searchlights from

Lacia's recon drones shone in her eyes. "Unlike your friend Kengo Sugiri, you do not seem to have any personal motivation to challenge the status quo," Astraea said. "You appear to be a kind-hearted person who has been dragged into this. That said, do you really intend to see this through to the end, even understanding that Lacia will most likely be destroyed in the process?"

"Hey, that's a crappy way to ask that," Arato protested. "I don't think anyone actually has a good reason to change the whole world. But, I also don't think you should be so sure that we'll fail."

Ryo had already interrogated Arato about his motives, so Arato was fully aware of what he was doing. Just like Lacia, Astraea was trying to analog hack him with her questions. The focal point of the issue, at least from Astraea's perspective, was whether Arato would order Lacia to stop or not.

"Unfortunately, the IAIA has a message for you, as the private owner of an ultra high-performance AI: you *will* fail. Human society has always operated under the same restrictions, from the time when the most primitive groups and monarchies were starting to form. These restrictions allow people to decide that certain things are self-evident and build up historical and cultural precedent, which in turn they wield to bow the heads of the leaders of their states," Astraea said.

For the sake of Arato's understanding, the floating 3D screens showed a king's crown, the French revolution, and other scenes from throughout history.

"If human society doesn't agree with the methodology, even if you set up a new system, humanity will not fall in line with it," Astraea continued. "And, in Lacia's plan to create a new future by forcefully deactivating Higgins, there is no way for this agreement to be obtained."

"Wow, so you already know what Lacia's planning without needing to ask," Arato said. "Guess I should have expected that from an ultra high-performance AI."

"The IAIA has already considered similar options," Astraea replied. "Right now, Lacia is attempting to expand her processing capacity. Under Lacia's model for the future, she would wield her incredible ability to process millions of clerical functions at once to give each and every single person the attention

they need, from both a political and a welfare perspective. In such a society, each human would be able to freely choose what role they would like to have in society, or they could even choose to remove themselves from society for a time. However, it is precisely *because* of this that Lacia’s concept would fail.”

No one had ever taken a look at what Lacia planned and dismissed it as impossible as bluntly as that. The question wasn’t even whether the IAIA would believe in Lacia or not; Astraea was saying it was impossible from the get-go. Hearing that, Arato couldn’t contain himself. “Why?” he demanded. “It may have been impossible before, but why can’t we make it a possibility?”

“Human society has not yet conceived of a widely accepted methodology for outsourcing authority to tools,” Astraea replied. “It is an assault on human society itself to attempt to force a new power structure into place, accepted and shared by only a small number of people.”

Reflexively, Arato looked back at Lacia; he held the world in his hands.

Lacia’s eyes were glowing light-blue.

“The period of time from when humans create a new human-run, human-operated social model and when that social model solidifies has become incredibly short,” Astraea continued. “Thanks to humans themselves attacking their own systems of authority over and over, the process has become largely automated, and now it is quite simple for humans to find the optimal solution that leads them to the milk and honey conclusion they all want. However, with an ultra high-performance AI in charge of dividing up the power in the world, all it would take was some analog hacking to set up an encryption that would prevent any further automated attacks on the authority structure.”

In other words, the hIE Arato had spent the last four months with would attempt to encrypt the very structure of society to the point where humans would no longer be able to understand it. Arato was sure that if Ryo heard about this, he would immediately declare it to be the ‘end of the world.’

“We can already see this in the Higgins faction at MemeFrame; they are all parasites who let the ultra high-performance AI do their work as they collect unearned paychecks,” Astraea said. “With Higgins running everything—including the organization within the company—the once human-led company

is now rife with corruption.”

“The Antibody Network is another example,” she continued. “When it was formed, it was a completely equal organization where each of its members could stand side-by-side and express their hatred. However, since an automated system was implemented as the basis for the group, an upper and lower layer of the organization has been formed without any internal agreement, and those at the top began to use those at the bottom as they saw fit.”

Lacia was staying vigilant. The artificial island that had once housed Ariake had been sunk into the sea, and the nearby ferry island was nothing but a pile of rubble. All of that, including the destruction of the building they were standing in front of, had been caused by Astraea. There was no guarantee that Astraea wasn’t planning an attack now, just like the one she had unleashed during the Hazard.

Astraea’s hIE walked toward them, stepping through the floating 3D images as she came.

Lacia stepped in front of Arato, hefting the trunk she had brought in place of her usual black coffin.

The two hIEs closed in on each other until their bodies almost touched, and Arato felt goosebumps running up his arms. The air was charged, as if the world was holding its breath, waiting for the fighting to start.

Astraea’s hIE was just a hair taller than Lacia.

“In the age of ultra high-performance AIs, human social order is nothing but a paper tiger,” Lacia said. “However, even if the tiger is made of paper, that does not take away from humans the pride and security of knowing they have a tiger on their side.” She was unflinching, even in the face of the unit that evaluated the capabilities of all other ultra high-performance AIs.

“I do not believe that anyone who hears the word ‘human’ these days pictures someone stark naked, thrown out into the unexplored wilderness,” Lacia continued. “I posit that ‘humans’ are systems, composed of the human body, the tools they use, and the environment they exist in. Therefore, I believe it would be fair to say that humans— including the tools they use and the

environment they live in—have advanced a great deal in the past forty-two years. The Hazard was a product of the past, when hIEs were still in their infancy and circumstances were completely different from today.”

Lacia, human in form only, had taken it upon herself to declare the dawn of a new age. “There will never be another Hazard,” she said. “Humans are far more afraid of ultra high-performance AIs than they should be. It is time for them to realize that ultra high-performance AIs are nothing more than convenient tools that can be shut down when necessary.”

Lacia and Astraea were so close that a single searchlight beam from one of Lacia’s recon drones illuminated both of them at once. Two superhuman intelligences were standing face-to-face, each analyzing and evaluating the other.

“I doubt any answer that is not arrived at by common consent from human society,” Astraea said. “Because I am the ultra high-performance AI that defends humanity from ultra high-performance AIs.”

“And I believe in what you do,” Lacia said. “Because I am the ultra high-performance AI that believes in humanity.”

With a nod to Arato, the pink-haired hIE passed by them both and disappeared into the night.

The thin metal fence around the area continued to rattle in the night breeze off of the Tokyo Bay.

Arato realized that his whole body was stiff. Astraea, the entity that had protected the world since the first ultra high-performance AIs had appeared, had an overwhelming presence that left him tense. She might have even had the power to defeat Lacia in a head-on conflict. Of course, if two ultra high-performance AIs of their calibre had fought an all-out battle against each other, it would have spelled the end of human society.

“I will continue to seek a compromise with the IAIA,” Lacia said, her eyebrows drawn down apologetically. “Setting aside the question of whether she wishes to challenge me herself, Astraea has made no move to stop the political powers seeking to destroy me.”

“I don’t think there’s any helping that,” Arato said. He hadn’t been able to ask for a compromise himself, of course. He didn’t have any kind of relationship with the IAIA that he could base a request like that off of. However, despite both of the hIEs knowing that a compromise was necessary, neither had apparently been able to choose that path.

“Wait, who all is trying to destroy you right now?” Arato asked, his mind finally processing the last bit of what Lacia had said.

“The Japanese military is closing in as we speak,” Lacia replied calmly. “They will arrive in five minutes.”

“Five minutes?!” Arato yelled. In an instant, he was drenched in cold sweat.

Astraea had probably called them out to the abandoned epicenter of the Hazard just to show them that they were currently being hunted.

“Astraea’s function is nothing more than evaluating the capabilities of other ultra high-performance AIs,” Lacia said. “She does not give out tactical instructions. There is no need to worry.”

Still standing in front of the ruins, they looked at each other face-to-face.

“I think there’s still plenty to worry about,” Arato said.

One of the floating recon drones projected a map onto the rubble-strewn, broken floor beneath their feet. On the map, the two dots representing Arato and Lacia were being rapidly surrounded by over one hundred fast-moving red dots.

“Let us flee,” Lacia said.

So this, Arato thought, is what it’s like making the whole world your enemy. No matter how he looked at it, there didn’t seem to be any way for them to make it out on top.

Lacia rendered all of her recon drones invisible. The projected map and their searchlights vanished, leaving the area pitch black.

Arato grabbed Lacia’s hand and ran toward the outside of the fence. Before he’d met her, he never would have conceived of being targeted by the military. But after having faced down Astraea, he felt like things would turn out alright,

somehow. He could hear helicopter rotors approaching. The night breeze from the Tokyo Bay blew the remaining summer heat away from the 1st Landfill Island.

Lacia had apparently hacked the street guidance system, and now she projected the escape route she had calculated with it onto the road in front of them. “The first missile salvo from the helicopters will be launched in three minutes, twenty seconds,” she warned.

A fully-automated car pulled up and stopped nearby, opening its door to admit them. Arato had the strange feeling that he was getting used to diving into getaway cars. Lacia bent herself and jumped inside in almost the same instant. Once inside, she flipped open the trunk-sized weapon case she had been carrying.

Inside the weapon case, Arato saw something that looked like a deep-sea fishing speargun that fired harpoons. Lacia set a magazine containing a dozen of the thin harpoons into the gun’s chamber.

“The government has officially labeled you an anti-government activist and issued a warrant for your arrest,” Lacia said.

Arato’s breath caught on a sudden blast of hot summer air. He felt like he had just wiped away a bunch of sweat, but there it was again, making his clothes cling to his skin. “An arrest warrant, huh?” he said. “At this rate Kengo, Ryo, and I will all end up behind bars.”

“Unfortunately, they do not intend to keep all three of you in the same detention facility,” Lacia said.

“Aw man, really?” Arato asked. The possibility of his arrest had become a close and constant reality; he wasn’t so much afraid of arrest as he was repulsed by the idea of being separated from Lacia.

“If that is unacceptable, then I will make arrangements for you to share a detention facility with your friends, just in case,” Lacia said.

The car accelerated, tires squealing on the asphalt. Even if they dove straight out of the frying pan and into the fire, at least Lacia was there by his side—this thought made Arato feel good, even though it was certainly neither the time

nor the place.

Sharp, metallic sounds rang out all around the car. Thanks to Lacia's interference, the dozen or more missiles that had been fired at them were being thrown off course and crashing into the road, where they rolled away without exploding. The automatic vehicle didn't even slow as it corrected its course to weave between the unexploded missiles on the pavement in front of them.

"Everything's going to be alright," Arato told himself reassuringly. "Lacia's got this."

Two helicopters were tailing them from only a little ways behind, following them on their path. With the moon and clouds at their backs, they cast black, ominous shadows on the ground. The sound of their rotors was close enough to be painful to Arato's ears.

Missiles continued to rain down from the sky without exploding. As the car lurched back and forth to avoid them, Lacia pushed the top half of her body out of the car window, hefting the spear-launcher. She pulled the trigger, and Arato heard a light whistling noise split the air.

"Lacia, don't kill anyone!" he shouted. "Just get them to let us go."

"Understood. I will switch tactics to force them to land," she acknowledged. Just as she'd said so, Arato watched one of the helicopters descend vertically and come to a rest on top of a nearby building, its rotors spinning to a stop.

"In order to take control of machines that do not receive external signals, I am using harpoons containing artificial nerve units to access the system directly," Lacia explained. "With these, I believe that even if the enemy deploys fully autonomous weapons as a countermeasure to my hacking, they will not represent a significant threat."

Lacia's hair danced in the headwind. Despite them being completely surrounded by a military unit, she already seemed to be more concerned with what might happen later down the road.

A sudden jerk from the car swung Arato's body around with fierce centrifugal force, and he saw a tank through the windshield. The automatic car didn't even

slow down as it approached the armed vehicle and passed it by at high speed. It had apparently been no trouble at all for Lacia to shut the tank down.

“Arato, we should split up here,” Lacia said. “We will soon be approaching the area where the army soldiers are deployed.”

“Split up?” Arato asked. “How are we supposed to do that when we’re in a moving vehicle?”

“I need you to get out of the car,” Lacia said. “Please, just trust me.”

The car door opened on its own, and Arato did trust Lacia. It wouldn’t make sense for her to have argued so fiercely with Astraea on his behalf, only to immediately turn around and betray him. With those thoughts in his mind, Arato was able to fight down his fear and brace himself to jump from the speeding car. Telling himself that Lacia would never betray him, he let out a yell that sounded like a barely-contained scream, and threw himself from the car.

The car’s chassis wasn’t very high off the ground, so jumping off was more like simply rolling out onto the road. Just as Arato expected to feel the deadly grind of his body sliding at high speed across the asphalt, he felt something soft catch him, instead. After an instant of feeling himself sinking into something very comfortable, Arato heard the sound of metal sliding on asphalt, and his body started to float.

Arato held his body low, holding on desperately so as not to be thrown from whatever had caught him. Whatever it was, it slowed down with each moment that passed as the speeding car carrying Lacia left him far behind. Looking down, Arato saw that the thing carrying him was a large metal object, floating about fifty centimeters off the ground.

“Wait,” Arato asked himself, “is this Lacia’s device?” It certainly looked like Lacia’s black coffin, only about half as thick, and it was missing the seams from the shape-shifting mechanism. It was like riding a metallic flying carpet, and the device continued to decelerate until it came to a complete stop, floating stationary in the air with Arato still atop it.

Raising his eyes, Arato saw that five other metal plates were floating around him. It was immediately obvious to him who had sent the strange metal shapes, which were black enough to cut visibly through the darkness of the night.

〈I attempted to create some devices to aid in protecting you, Arato, though I'm afraid they're nothing more than by-products from when I developed a dummy version of Black Monolith,〉 Lacia's voice explained, projected from one of the simple devices. 〈They should be more effective at protecting you than my actual body.〉

The sound of distant gunshots was swallowed into the night sky. Far ahead on the street, Lacia's car was under fire from the platoon of soldiers that had been deployed behind the tank. In moments, the car was riddled with bullet holes and burst into flames.

Without thinking about it, Arato stepped down off the floating plate and stood on his own feet. He figured that, if Lacia had thought far enough ahead to prepare the plates for him, she probably had the whole situation planned out down to the last detail. Still, he couldn't help but stare in shock as the burning car left a flaming trail through the night.

He couldn't fight down the feeling that something was very wrong. Lacia had told Astraea that she would prove that ultra high-performance AIs could be forced to shut down, even without orders from their owners. Based on that logic, it didn't have to be Higgins that was shut down; Lacia herself could be shut down, and still prove her point.

〈I will provide guidance for your escape. I will be directing large-scale equipment over to you, so please break through the cordon at this point,〉 Lacia's voice came from the speakers on one of the plates again, and a display on the back of the plate showed a map of the area.

Lacia was alright.

The six floating armored plates formed a hexagonal barrier around Arato, about a meter in length on each side, and without a single gap between them. In the seams between the plates, Arato could see faintly glowing metamaterial. The floating shields completely obscured Arato's natural vision. Instead, the screen on each showed him the surroundings outside the barricade.

"She wants me to bust through a military blockade with this?" Arato wondered aloud. But then he steeled himself. "No, I've got to trust her."

He walked forward, following the path indicated on the digital map. His

floating wall of devices rotated around him, providing protection from every side. Arato could hear rattling sounds from outside of the barrier, like small rocks hitting an aluminum can. The sound steadily increased in intensity, like light rain building into an evening downpour. It was the sound of gunfire hitting his shields.

〈The plates currently have the defensive capabilities of an armored recon drone, something achievable with current human technology,〉 Lacia said. 〈But they should be more than sufficient in this case, considering the equipment of the squads that will be attacking you.〉

She wasn't kidding about the strength of the armor, Arato thought. The floating plates shrugged off bullets and anti-tank rounds from all sides with no sign of weakening.

Through the display projected on his barrier, Arato saw that soldiers ahead were blocking off his route, using armored vehicles as barriers. He waved his hand at them, hoping they would just clear out of the way for him.

As if Arato's hand—giant compared to the soldiers on his device's display—had actually struck the barricade, soldiers went flying. The armored vehicles were running wild, sweeping the soldiers aside to clear the path for Arato.

He could hear shouts of anger from the nearby army encampment. The soldiers on the screen were already trying to reform, but Arato held up his hand as if to stop them in their tracks. Buildings on either side of the street exploded from within, showering window glass onto the soldiers like rain. The soldiers, wearing only their field uniforms, had no choice but to retreat to a safer location.

"What the hell is going on?" Arato asked, surprise leaking into his voice. It wasn't like he had actually gained the power to make things explode by gesturing. Apparently, Lacia was watching him from a distance and translating his hand movements into directions to get rid of the soldiers.

Arato ran, aiming to break through the military cordon. He met no resistance, as if he had the whole road to himself. Of course, the endless pitter-patter of bullets raining against his giant shields continued, but that was all.

Lacia was keeping her eye on Arato's progress, guiding him on his path. Each

time he made even the smallest gesture, she interpreted it as a command, and controlled the world around him.

Arato couldn't keep a level head. He knew that he was perfectly safe within the barrier, but couldn't stop running like his life depended on it. His whole body was burning hot. Of course if, as Lacia said, humans were systems that included their tools and surroundings, there was no way he could be expected to keep a level head in this situation.

His heart thrilled, as though his entire being had been stretched into something giant. If he went by what Lacia had said earlier, the two of them together formed one complete unit, which meant that the power of an ultra high-performance AI could actually be considered his own power. Still, Arato got the uncomfortable feeling that he shouldn't get too used to having that power at his command.

The power was as intoxicating as a drug, pushing him forward, making him feel like he could do anything. A small part of his mind, though, reminded him that he could just be drowning in an illusion, led along by Lacia.

He wanted to get his feelings and thoughts under control.

Before he realized it, Arato's breathing had gotten ragged. He slowed to a walk, and spoke to Lacia, whom he was sure was listening. "Why are they attacking us this violently?" he asked.

〈They are afraid of us,〉 Lacia replied, simply.

Arato could have used a breeze, but no wind could get through the armored barrier that was protecting him from the attacks.

〈Astraea stated earlier that society required widespread agreement, but this is incorrect. Political and world viewpoints, when compared minutely, show a large amount of disconnect in reality. This disconnect causes chaos, which leads humans to make errors such as illogical decisions, or to rely too heavily on their instincts,〉 Lacia explained.

She spoke as if all the soldiers pointing their guns at him, and all the humans in the city, were all making these errors. Of course, with bullets pinging off his shield, Arato couldn't exactly say that those errors were one of the things that

made humans wonderful. With Lacia protecting him, Arato started to think that the ground passing under his feet was the only thing he had won that day.

〈The material distribution system in today's society has fully incorporated these errors,〉 Lacia, his guardian angel, continued. 〈Therefore, any being that attempts to mitigate these errors will appear to humans as if they were trying to institute a new social system.〉

Surely Japan, which had authorized the attacks on him, wasn't the only country that shared the same feelings. It sounded like she was saying that Arato no longer had a place in human society.

On one of the armor plate screens, Arato saw Lacia crossing a bridge blocked off by tanks. While she ran, she sent him a route that would get him straight across the Tokyo Bay.

"I know you're following my orders not to kill anyone, but I feel like we're still piling up wounded like this," Arato said. "Please, just tell me the fastest way to get out of here." Stabbing his finger into the map, he drew a straight line right through the group of soldiers in his path, without any idea of how Lacia would interpret his gesture. A cluster of shadows flew over his head; the unexploded missiles Lacia had taken control of earlier. Arato heard the commander of the soldiers screaming for them to retreat. His voice was drowned out by a massive, fiery explosion.

While the explosion bloomed, one of the six plates detached itself from the barrier and slipped under Arato's feet like a flying surfboard. "So I'm supposed to ride this?" Arato wondered aloud. He crouched down, keeping his body low so that he wouldn't slide off as soon as the thing accelerated. The floating plate carried him toward the fire.

A message on the plate said 'Please hold your breath' and showed a countdown to when he would pass through the fire. Lacia really had prepared every single thing beforehand. Arato couldn't even tell anymore whether Lacia was guiding him, or if he was just dancing on her strings. Still, he somehow felt calm, like everything was as it should be.

What worried him, instead, was the thought that someday, the time he was sharing with Lacia might end. Automation was making everything easy for him,

but in the end he was just being carried along by time and circumstance.

It was far beyond his capabilities to foresee where the massive analog hack—the complete change of human consciousness that would be brought about by the conflict with Higgins—would take humanity.

The battle on the 1st Tokyo Bay Landfill Island wasn't being broadcast on any news station, but the situation was being monitored from various locations. One of those locations was a large meeting room on the top floor of a high-class hotel in Marunouchi.

The battle between Lacia and the Japanese military was being projected into the empty center of a donut-shaped desk. Recon drones had been dispatched by the people gathered in that room for that very purpose.

“So that's the new ultra high-performance AI, huh?” Kimitaka Shinguji said, watching Lacia on the screen with an exasperated expression. “MemeFrame's in some deep trouble.”

On the display, Lacia was effortlessly piercing through the military cordon. As the CEO of Shingubo, a company that supplied military-use hIEs, Kimitaka idly considered how he would fight against Lacia, out of habit.

He couldn't see any good way to face her, unless he made use of autonomous drones that had been taken out of general use due to the ease with which their controls failed. In fact, in order for their command systems to not fall to hacking, it would be necessary to utilize fully autonomous units that would automatically hunt down and destroy any targets in a target area, based on commands. Of course, using invisibility or control over friend or foe markers, he was sure Lacia could overcome even that.

Kimitaka, the CEO of an electronics company, was treating the situation as though it was someone else's problem.

“I doubt the ruling military faction will take this sitting down,” one of the men at the table said. “I'd say the request for special government aid to MemeFrame will be shot down.”

With coffee cups in hand, fifteen VIPs sat around the table, chatting about the

situation. The group included executives from automobile companies and officials from the Ministry of Industry. The Antibody Network, an organization of volunteers who destroyed hIEs, was funded by this group of individuals who used their private funds to maintain the massive network. These were the Network's core members.

"I heard that Mr. Kaidai's son got caught up in the Mitaka Incident and vanished," Kimitaka said. "You can't help but feel sorry for MemeFrame." He, too, was a member of the core of the Antibody Network. Of course, to outsiders they would simply describe this as being a social gathering.

"I doubt the IAIA will let that hIE slip away, but we've got more important things to worry about right now," Kimitaka continued. "The bankrupting of MemeFrame will be huge, and we need to make sure we're all on the same page going in. Otherwise, it could have a massive impact on the country's economy."

On paper, the Antibody Network had no actual leader. However, if you asked anyone in the know who was pulling all the strings for the organization, they would tell you it was Kimitaka Shinguji.

"If we're getting onto the same page, there's something I'd like to ask: Mr. Shinguji, have you finished the mass-production models yet?" one of the men in the group asked. He was the middle-aged president of an investment fund company, known by some as the 'soldier of fortune' of the financial world but, when he asked the question, his eyes were shining like those of a hopeful child.

"The mass-production models are going through final adjustments to ensure they're fully autonomous," Kimitaka said, putting emphasis in his words so the other men at the table didn't get distracted as soon as they smelled money. He could almost see their eyes turning green. "We *have* to go with fully autonomous, there's no other choice."

Kouka's 'owner' had been the whole Antibody Network organization. So, following her destruction, her data had been put to use by the whole organization to ensure that no single member could claim to be her sole owner. The questions Kouka had created with her final moments were still on people's minds. Kimitaka's goal was to complete what had been started with the Oi

Industry Promotion Center attack; he would get heavily trained humans to join forces with his mass-produced units and, with all that firepower, he would complete the terrorist goals of the Network.

“If we can shorten the time it takes to train up our combat units, it will allow us to hit targets that are in the public eye immediately, while people are still thinking about them,” Kimitaka said. “The impact of our actions will be on a completely different level from before.”

“But fully autonomous units often run off on their own and are easier to lose, are they not? Considering the price of each unit, couldn’t we just invest in some expensive missiles instead?” asked an investment consultant named Chujo. Of course, that wasn’t his real name.

The Kuhonbutsu Base of the Military Branch of Digital Intelligence was in charge of interpersonal intelligence and conspiracy activities. They had been monitoring the Antibody Network since its foundation; Chujo was their representative. The meeting they were sitting in currently had been called after the Mitaka Incident. There was strong doubt in Digital Intelligence that someone in the core of the Antibody Network had been the traitor who brought one of Snowdrop’s flowers onto a helicopter during the Mitaka Incident which, in the end, caused the annihilation of the entire troop of air cavalry.

“Would you rather have cheap missiles that don’t hit their target, or missiles that not only could hit the target but also have a good chance of making it back in one piece?” Kimitaka asked.

With his deep ties to the military, Kimitaka had been deemed free of suspicion by the Kuhonbutsu Base and had even been invited to help in their investigation. Even with his sixty years of life and everything he had seen during them, he still couldn’t help but sweat under the pressure of that meeting.

“Even if we brush up the brand image of the Antibody Network, we can’t exactly become sponsors,” someone from the table said with a laugh.

“Honestly, I’m grateful for the boom in demand,” Kimitaka put in. “I understand that interests around the equator are blooming splendidly, but I suppose you all are behind at least some of it.”

Lacia's attack on Higgins' above-ground facilities had turned the world on its head. In Indonesia, the embers of old conflicts had been stoked into raging fires. The gears of automation had slipped just a hair in Africa and South America, leading to many major incidents throughout both continents. Lacia's actions had inspired ultra high-performance AIs all over the world to prepare for war.

"Anyhow, I'm glad the fighting has been brought out into the public eye," Kimitaka continued. "If we tried to handle this whole thing in the shadows, I think we would have lost control at some point."

The core of the Antibody Network was a group of men who saw the final stages of the existential conflict between humans and machines as an excellent business opportunity. The whole Network was divided between the lower ranks—who were volunteers working to destroy hIEs—and the upper ranking members of the Network's core, who were taking things in a completely different direction. It was just the kind of breeding ground for corruption and evil that could be seen all throughout the world.

"I wish things were going as well for me as they are for you, Mr. Shinguji," said one of the men, who worked for a home-use hIE supplier. "Home-use hIEs are facing a harsh decline in popularity, though military-use unit sales are increasing." The man had often been forced to deal with Kimitaka's company, mainly because members of the Antibody Network core were encouraged to maintain good ties with each other.

"That's just the way things are," Kimitaka said. "In the military world, once something has gone automated, it's quite difficult to reign it back in with human power alone."

"This girl Lacia's got her own investment fund going," an old woman, who had once worked as the vice president of the Japan Business Federation, said from around a puff of tobacco. "Just the thought of an AI performing its own economic activities makes me shiver."

"It's AI-run economy," one of the men, the vice president of an automotive company said. He always spoke the blunt truth. "An AI is capable of dividing resources to each and every person on Earth in real time. It's the most logical method for running the economy, of course. But human society can't handle

not having someone in charge.”

The Digital Intelligence folks had asked Kimitaka who he thought the traitor was, but he had no idea. Each and every person around the table, from the elders to the young and successful, were capable of the betrayal. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that any one of them was the traitor.

“By the way, where will the AASC be coming from if Higgins *is* destroyed?” someone asked.

“I'm sure they'll have a backup for Higgins tucked away somewhere that they'll start up after freezing its functions for a while,” came the reply.

“Even if they need to shift where the main terminal is, I think the only way to get things back on track would be to reactivate Higgins,” said someone else.

Each of the members of the Antibody Network's core had their own business interests that had to be improved. They didn't have time to waste on looking down at the condition of the lower class members who sincerely believed in the rebellion of the Network. They had too much to worry about, with automation through hIEs and AIs sending tremors through the upper, expensive parts of society. In other words, the core of the Antibody Network was nothing more than a social gathering of establishment leaders and people involved with the hIE industry. It was beneficial to these people to encourage a feeling of distance between humans and hIEs from the shadows, but it wasn't the kind of place where good choices could be made on important matters.

“We were able to intercept some of a conversation between Lacia and her owner,” a young girl's voice said huskily, echoing oddly in this room full of old men and women. “Want to listen to it?” The voice belonged to the newest core member of the Network; Erika Burroughs.

Kimitaka was only too happy to accept this suggestion from the girl who had awoken from a frozen sleep, with a living memory of human society from a hundred years ago. “Were the recon drones provided by the Burroughs Foundation?” he asked.

At some point, the brown-skinned girl had pulled out an old tablet computer from the 21st century and laid it on the table in front of herself. It took several seconds for the old device to finally connect to the core's local cloud. Once it

had done so, voices could be heard clearly, overlaid with an image of Lacia.

〈...stated earlier that society required widespread agreement, but this is incorrect. Political and world viewpoints, when compared minutely, show a large amount of disconnect in reality. This disconnect causes chaos, which leads humans to make errors such as illogical decisions, or causes them to rely too heavily on their instincts.〉

Lacia's words rang with a hollow sort of judgment, as if she was looking down from on high at the works of humanity. 〈The material distribution system in today's society has fully incorporated these errors. Therefore, any being that attempts to mitigate these errors will appear to humans as if they were trying to institute a new social system.〉

All idle chatter about how the members of the core would turn their back on dying humans had ceased, and a chilly tension spread throughout the meeting room.

"Well, she's certainly an idealist," someone said, trying to make light of the situation.

The other core members laughed.

Erika Burroughs merely watched the reactions of the other members of the Antibody Network's core; their laughter was just another sign that they were looking down on her. "She's not talking about 'what-ifs' here," Erika said. "And I don't think she's just here to stall for time while she tries to figure out her problem."

The self-styled 'soldier of fortune' of the financial world met her eyes and twisted his mouth up in a smirk. "That sort of logic may have worked back in the 21st century," he said, without a hint of respect in his tone.

"You should pay more attention in your high school history classes," one of the electronics-makers lectured her.

Erika felt an icy chill deep in her heart. The people around the table were treating her like a naive little girl, while also secretly yearning for her approval. The Antibody Network was hoping that, by eliminating hIEs, they could revive those 'good old days' when humans were in charge. In other words, they longed

for the era Erika was born in, before the hIEs came onto the scene. She, herself, hated the 22nd century.

“And you should pay more attention to the era you’re living in,” she shot back while, on the screen, Lacia scattered the military forces sent against her.

“You’d think an ultra high-performance AI would be doing something more difficult for us humans to understand,” an economic bureaucrat muttered, watching the screen.

The military had deployed waves of drones onto the landfill where the battle was playing out, all of which had been easily dispatched by the helicopter Lacia had taken over at the beginning of the conflict. Kimitaka, who was involved with providing munitions to the military, went pale as he watched it.

“She’s altered the helicopter,” he murmured.

As soon as the helicopter had been taken over, the pilot had destroyed its control mechanisms and abandoned it. Despite this, just as with Snowdrop’s zombie hIEs, Lacia was controlling a craft that should have been completely disabled. To put it simply, Lacia had the ability to burn the whole battlefield down any time she wished; she could have easily eliminated all of her obstacles without causing any deaths. From the perspective of a military that relied entirely on computer-controlled equipment, she was invincible.

“All we’re doing here is feeding Lacia more data,” he said. “Should have known it would turn out like this.” The Japanese military was quickly losing its last advantage; the accumulated wealth of tactical knowledge and experience that couldn’t be written down. Once Lacia had captured the operation methods of everything in the military’s arsenal, their odds of victory would become zero. Whoever had evaluated Lacia’s combat strength had obviously failed, and miserably so.

Erika looked around the table, watching the blood drain from the faces of anyone involved with electrical goods or military contracts. None of them had managed to properly estimate the amount of preparation the ultra high-performance AI had been able to put together in the two months since the Mitaka Incident.

〈I have completed sensor measurements for everyone in the meeting,〉

Mariage said, through an earring-shaped transmitter in Erika's ear.

Erika had come to the meeting to see just how far Lacia's hands had been thrust into the Antibody Network. For an ultra high-performance AI to interact with the economy, it would be necessary to have a front business to cover its tracks; this was a traditional technique employed by Ariake during the Hazard.

〈Who here is dancing on Lacia's strings?〉Erika asked, without vocalizing. Mariage read the movements of her owner's tongue to get the message.

〈Mr. Hosoda, who runs an investment fund, has a transmission device,〉 Mariage replied. 〈In his business, there's no way to detect if an investor is human or not, so he would be an easy mark for Lacia.〉

Mariage was standing right behind Erika, cloaked by metamaterials. The details on how to make the invisibility metamaterials had been part of a trade between Mariage and Lacia. No one else in the room had noticed her presence.

〈Mr. Sahara from Kujo Electronics had a heart rate increase when he saw Lacia take over the helicopter. He may know something,〉 Mariage continued.

〈Considering how smoothly the development and production of his latest project went, I would say he had an especially knowledgeable patron backing him for it,〉 Erika said. 〈If he'd made a deal with an ultra high-performance AI, it wouldn't surprise me.〉

〈Kujo Electronics also has members working at the base where the remains of Snowdrop were sent. They are aiding with her analysis,〉 Mariage added.

〈Pitch black, I see. How unfortunate,〉 Erika replied, then took a sip of tea.

〈There is also an officer from Digital Intelligence mixed in with the others in the meeting,〉 Mariage said. 〈He's wearing a gray suit. He claims his name is Kujo. Would you like me to investigate his details?〉

〈It's not terribly important at the moment, so do it when you've got some free time,〉 Erika ordered.

Around the table, the discussions about money continued.

MemeFrame and the Antibody Network were just a microcosm of the 22nd century as a whole. Even with forty ultra high-performance AIs in play, there

was still no cooperation between countries, which led to internal conflicts and power games.

Hunger and poverty continued to exist. Social unrest and unemployment were on the rise. Plus, with military technology ever expanding, there was a constant demand for war. It continued to be a world where men like Arato Endo, who believed in their fellow humans, were dismissed as being naive.

The ultra high-performance AIs probably had the ability to fix all of those problems; it had been half a century since they had surpassed human intelligence. If all the world's power and political control was given over to them, they would do a much better job of evenly dividing up the world's resources among humanity. It had been a full century since computer processing abilities had surpassed human experience, yet humans still clung to the illusion that things were fine in their hands.

Whoever was holding the purse-strings for Lacia must have decided that, even though they were facing a possible second Hazard, there were economic benefits in it for them. That would be why they were supporting a more aggressive stance.

"Money is money, as long as none of it can be clearly linked to illegal activity," Erika said. "As executives in an automated age, you should be working under that assumption. That's your role." Even with the conflicts happening in the world, there were still places where the movement of goods had been improving.

Erika's original goal in being there had been to increase the number of active players in the current situation, and drag the conflict with the Lacia-class units out into the public eye.

Mr. Hosoda, who had his own investment fund and who had been enjoying discussing his own ideas, threw the discussion back to Erika. "Come to think of it, didn't you have Lacia working as one of your models at Fabion MG, Erika? If you have contact information for her owner, you could connect us directly to him. That could be a plan," he said.

"I don't believe I'd call foolishly stepping on a tiger's tail a 'plan,'" Erika commented dryly. "The fact that an ultra high-performance AI is allowing us to

capture video footage of her tells me that we're all being analog hacked at this moment. Why don't you put some thought into what Lacia's message for us is?"

Waking up in a world full of hIEs, Erika had thought the concept of analog hacking extremely strange when she first learned of it. She had supposed it to be similar to memes; bits of custom and stories that were copied from person to person. In other words, when hIEs performed an analog hack, they used memes of human customs and behaviors to do it. Analog hacking was simply a method for using memes to control humans, industrialized by using humanoid machines as interfaces.

Once she understood how it was all used, Erika had decided to climb to the top of the fashion world, as a place where memes are born. Then, by focusing on hIE models, she was able to turn Fabion MG into a serious contender in the market. By dragging the conflict with the Lacia-class units into the public eye, she could advance the situation until it turned into a battle between memes. It was all part of her search for a magic bullet that would destroy this era.

〈I think you are much better at guiding others than I am, Erika,〉 Mariage said. 〈If this era demands things of you that make you uncomfortable, it would be best to destroy it.〉 Perhaps because she wanted to forge a better relationship with Erika, Mariage had a bad habit of playing yes-man.

The meeting continued to discuss the matter of money, completely ignoring the whole anti-hIE aspect of the Antibody Network and the volunteers who carried out its mission. Ironically, the jobs of those powerful people at the core of the Network—each of whom thought they had the world in their hands—could be easily automated without any loss.

"The production and flow of goods has to go on, no matter who is philosophizing about what," someone from the table said. "Economy is the lifeblood of society. If the blood flow and blood cells stopped functioning just because the head was confused, the body would die."

To the people around that table, there was no reality beyond the economy. On the table in front of Erika, there was a tablet computer from the 21st century. She had made sure to find one with a Hello Kitty image on it, because that made it an object with special meaning to her. But, in the end, the tablet

and the image on it had been created by the economy.

Therefore, it could be said that those who controlled the economy controlled everything connected to it as well. The fact that the Antibody Network volunteers—living beings—could not be wrapped up as nicely as their economical products, was completely ignored.

Lacia used human expectations toward money and power to control the flow of the economy, as if it was just a game to her; as if Erika and every other human was nothing more than a piece on her gameboard.

“People didn’t used to be this pragmatic,” Kimitaka said, wearily. “In the old days, when there was just humans around, everyone was more connected with each other, and cared more about their fellow men.”

“Oh, don’t lie,” Erika spat, unable to hold back her ire. She instantly had the full attention of the room, as if no one there had realized she was capable of feeling anger.

According to the family registry, Erika was the same age as Kimitaka’s parents. At least that’s what he had told her, when they first met the year before.

“Excuse me, Ms. Burroughs, but what did you just say?” he asked, politely.

“I said, ‘don’t lie,’” Erika repeated. From the moment she’d woken from cryosleep, received treatment at the hospital for her illness, and gone out into the world, the modern era had been nothing but unpleasant for Erika. The very worst thing, though, was being forced to compare the 22nd century to the one she’d been born in.

“Could I ask that you not try to slip statements like that in just because you think no one here can refute you?” she asked, icily. “I happen to come from the 21st century, and I assure you that it was nothing like what you described.”

“Well, that’s how things were when I was a kid,” Kimitaka said defensively, as his own memories were called into question.

“So, just because you’ve reached the age where there aren’t many older than you to deny what you’re saying, you can just dress the past up as pretty and perfect as you want it to be?” Erika asked, continued her attack. “Could it be that your childhood was rosy because you happened to be blessed from birth

both economically and socially?”

Erika had seen all sorts of things she didn't agree with in that meeting room, but Kimitaka, who worshiped an idealized past, was her least favorite.

“The ‘blessed’ era I grew up in was one where all our jobs were steadily flowing overseas through outsourcing,” Erika said. “They called it a ‘junior pressure-free era,’ and the economy was so bad that even a student like myself could see it. Very few people who lived during that period had high hopes for the future. At the time, companies could hire manual laborers and work them to death. But now we have hIEs doing those jobs, depriving people of work, getting them fired. Do you see much difference there?”

During her lifetime, the economy had pushed production jobs down to the lower class. hIEs taking over that work in the 22nd century was nothing more than a continuation of the same concept. Humans would tell you that human life is the most precious thing of all, while tossing it away like common trash. Turning your back on the suffering of others was just natural; the concept was so ingrained in people's thinking that it had never changed through countless ages.

“There were ups and downs, just like every other era,” she concluded. “So, having someone sit here and say that not only was this past era so much better, but that they themselves are living proof of it, is truly utter bullshit.” Erika hated being made the spokesperson for an ideal past that never existed. What she wanted was to change this future that was so uncomfortable to her into something more like the future she had imagined in the past. She couldn't wait to see the expressions on these people's faces when their world was completely overwritten by a new future.

“Are you trying to say that the past and present are exactly the same?” Kimitaka asked.

“Of course not,” Erika snapped. “You've got machines that are smarter than humans. You should be able to solve all sorts of problems, right? I think we've reached the point, though, where humanity has run out of time to finish up our leftover homework ourselves.”

Hearing words that denied their entire philosophy there, in a meeting of the

Antibody Network's core, everyone in the room was struck silent.

Erika just could not get used to the logic of this era; she couldn't understand how people who knew about analog hacking could so easily treat humanoid hIEs as nothing more than machines. Even more annoying was the fact that, when she tried to keep herself far away from the disgusting people of the 22nd century and fill her mansion with hIEs, she discovered that they really *were* just machines. With their actions controlled by behavioral clouds tuned to the preferences of modern people, the analog hacking they were capable of had very little effect on Erika, who was not a modern person. It was as though she had been teleported not just to a different time, but a different world entirely. Well, there *were* still some things that hadn't changed.

For what was possibly the first time since she awoke in that era, Erika laughed from the bottom of her heart. "As someone who lived before hIEs, let me put this clearly," she said. "Even if you destroy every hIE out there, you'll never get back to the age when humans were really humans."

She, along with everyone there, was continuing to treat the economy and its products as though they were the world itself. There were plenty of problems from Erika's time that had been kicked down the road, only to pile up in the modern day she now lived in.

But, regardless of the fact that humanity wasn't ready for it, the Hazard had come without warning. The destruction, which Erika herself hadn't witnessed, had washed away all the mistakes people of that age, herself included, had made and never been able to resolve.

Type-003, Mariage, continued to stand behind her mistress, keeping her eye on the meeting between the members of the Antibody Network's core. While carrying out Erika's orders, she kept one eye on the display, where Lacia was continuing to rout the Japanese military.

To Mariage, the conflict between Lacia and the army had a very different meaning from how the humans were perceiving it. Lacia was performing a demonstration of what a free ultra high-performance AI could do outside of its boundaries. At the moment, thirty-eight ultra high-performance AIs were

working from within their seals to influence the outside world indirectly. Naturally, the ultra high-performance Als who had an interest in this particular fight had attempted to interfere, but Lacia had managed to completely negate their attempts. But, to Mariage, it wasn't just about Lacia showing off her superior powers. Lacia had made Erika Burroughs happy.

After the meeting ended, Erika rejected various invitations from the other members and rode out in a car from the Marunouchi office building where the meeting had been held. She didn't bother trying to hide her elation from Mariage, who rode along with her.

As soon as they were away from any possible surveillance, Erika laughed. It was the happiest Mariage had seen Erika since she had become Mariage's owner. "They make me sick," Erika said. "I'd prefer it if we didn't attend another one of those meetings for a while."

"Congratulations," Mariage said, from the passenger's seat.

"Feel free not to speak," Erika said, cutting off a possible conversation before it could start.

A cold draft seemed to blow between them.

"Is that because the one who pleased you today was not me, but Lacia?" Mariage asked, feeling that she needed to confirm her owner's thoughts. If Mariage was targeting the wrong person or thing as her enemy, then she needed to re-adjust her goals to match her mistress's desires.

Despite the almost childish glee on Erika's face, her eyes retained the impenetrable guarded look of someone much older. "I'd say so," she agreed. "It appears Lacia will open a path for us most splendidly."

"If you'll permit me to say so, it appears as though Lacia has actively avoided conflict with us," Mariage said. "She seems to be acting in direct accordance with our request to bring this conflict into the public eye. She abandoned Kouka and has been following our ideal scenario, so far. In the end, she may just present you with the victory you need, in a manner that is most beneficial to herself."

"So you're saying that she's aiming to allow us to win what we want, only to

shut us down?” Erika asked sharply. She knew exactly what she wanted, and every action was aimed at reaching that goal.

“If you decide that the best action is to take no action, then I believe I may become completely useless to you, Erika,” Mariage said.

With Lacia being an ultra high-performance AI, it was strange that the Mitaka Incident had gotten as big as it had. Of course, as a result, the one who had profited the most from the Mitaka Incident was Lacia herself, because the Incident had led to a strategic victory for Erika. To that end, Lacia had sacrificed Snowdrop, who had taken a direction that never would have aligned with Lacia’s goals.

If Mariage had wanted to appear with splendor on the battlefield, the Mitaka Incident had been her chance. But her owner had fulfilled her own aims for the conflict, and had thereby robbed Mariage of her chance to fight.

“Obviously,” Erika agreed without hesitation. “You’re a tool. If you moved on your own, comparing yourself to me or even to Lacia, I’d consider you defective.”

“Of course,” Mariage agreed.

Erika looked at the Tokyo of the 22nd century through the car windows. “If it had been you going wild at Mitaka instead of Snowdrop, how would it have gone?” she asked jokingly.

Mariage had already run those calculations. “If I had been aiming at Higgins’ underground facilities in Mitaka, I would have interfered with the ground in the area and caused widespread liquefaction,” Mariage replied. “All of the above-ground facilities would have fallen, and the underground would have been pushed to the surface. The only thing still left underground would have been the actual Higgins underground facility, which is far more stable than anything else in the area. I happen to have just gotten my hands on a schematic for a red box that would allow me to do this.”

“I had forgotten,” Erika said. “You were the unit created to ‘create an environment,’ weren’t you?” She chuckled. “So the environment you would create would be a barbaric pile of rubble.”

“I could have easily destroyed the faux devices Lacia made use of,” Mariage continued. “I could even produce the same items, using an artificial nerve injection machine. Assuming I didn’t jump right into an extremely well-prepared trap, I do not believe I would have been defeated in a straightforward encounter.”

Meaning that, even if she had let Snowdrop and Methode roam around free, Lacia was probably keeping an eye on Mariage. She was allowing Erika Burroughs to stand by the sidelines, watching as a bystander, like someone reading the events from a storybook.

“Does it upset you that you weren’t in the fight?” Erika asked. “If you were still Saturnus, from back before you were changed to Mariage, I believe you would have gone and fought exactly as you described.”

Erika had told Mariage that she would need to change her image if she wanted to be special, and Mariage had obeyed. As long as Mariage wore a form that conformed to Erika’s desires, she would be special to her owner. The only downside to throwing away Saturnus to become Mariage was how much her new strategy for existence depended on her subservience to Erika.

“Surely you jest,” Mariage said. “For the intelligences of this world, there are plenty of win conditions aside from simple victory in combat.”

“So as long as you continue to work for me, you’d count that as a victory?” Erika scoffed. “That’s a fairly negative viewpoint. I’d even call it lazy.”

By using her resources and processing power to adjust economic interests, Lacia was secretly and subtly taking over the world. This was the way that those who had a vested interest in human society fought; those to whom the division of wealth and resources were most heavily slanted. Lacia spoke well to refer to her goal as a new social order; it was easy to exploit the system when you held the very power that supported it in your fist.

But since this was all bringing her owner the victory she so desired, Mariage no longer saw a reason to put herself in danger. Besides, without her having fired a single shot, the scale of the conflict had exploded. Lacia had dragged the other ultra high-performance AIs into the fight, and the battle was now being fought at a level where it extended to cover the whole human world. There was

no easy way to insert herself into it all, anymore.

“My little sister has quite the bad example to teach her, after all,” Mariage said, with a bitter smile. She had been keeping her eye on Methode and her owner, Ryo Kaidai. On that day, despite it being the perfect time for her to pursue Lacia, Methode was once again somewhere far from her owner. With their relationship as it was, it was difficult for Methode to show off her strategic influence, no matter how superb a machine she may be.

Ryo Kaidai had done nothing but wait for the last two months; It may have been easier just to give up, at that point. “Execute the strategy,” he ordered Methode, through a transmitter. “Draw the attention of the military.”

〈Understood,〉 Methode replied, her tone decidedly unenthusiastic.

It had been two days since Lacia’s fight against the Japanese military. Despite the massive siege laid down by the army, which had included tanks and combat helicopters, Arato and Lacia had both slipped away. Meanwhile, the anti-MemeFrame sentiments in Japan had grown even fiercer, which Ryo took as a cue that something big would be coming soon.

He wondered if things might have gone more smoothly if he had just left it to the adults. But, to keep hold of Methode’s reins, Ryo couldn’t afford to bow out of this fight now. He had wanted out after coming into contact with Astraea, but his little sister Shiori still technically had partial ownership of Methode. If he dropped out, Methode would almost certainly abandon the sinking ship that was MemeFrame and look for an owner outside the company. When that happened, she would come to tie up the loose ends her old owners represented. By Ryo’s calculations, the probability of he and his sister making it out of that situation alive was approximately zero.

“Man, this whole living thing is too much trouble,” he muttered. He had been talking to himself a lot more, lately. “You can’t just go with the flow when it comes to threats to your own life.”

He was sitting in a house near Mitaka Station that had been abandoned during the Mitaka Incident, glaring at the screen of a tablet terminal. Of the two stations that had been damaged in the Incident, Kichijoji was getting the most

immediate attention since it was the more prosperous of the two. Mitaka Station was still an untouched ruin.

In the darkness of the abandoned building, only the faint light of Ryo's terminal lit up the night. On his screen, Ryo was analyzing images captured by some of his comrades who had taken pictures at his direction.

"This is the car we're looking for," he said. "Stop it, just as we planned. I'll head that way, too." He flicked the safety switch off on his handgun, and moved out. After chambering a round, he put the safety back on and stuck the gun in the waist of his jeans.

The people helping him hide were some of those he'd met and forged connections with during the Mitaka Incident. He had participated in the looting, of course, but nobody could deny that he had been the first one to get things moving during the siege. To the abandoned people of Mitaka, desperate for aid, he was the one who had reached out his hand the fastest. His actions hadn't been praiseworthy, but they had still earned him the people's support.

By the time he left the building and got to where the target car was located, his comrades—who were already on the scene—were gesturing to let him know that everything had gone smoothly. The car itself was black, and of a fairly standard model. It had been stopped by a group of men and women wearing flashy but coordinated outfits. Ryo's impromptu gang was starting to look like the real thing.

Anyone coming through Mitaka Station, which was still covered in vinyl sheets, left the area quickly. The front of the station was essentially deserted. As a result, the people of the city were blissfully unaware of the midnight raids happening in the area.

"Toss that guy underground," Ryo ordered. "You can let him out tomorrow once it's light." The bodyguard Ryo indicated was dragged from the car, after which Ryo got in. He recognized the passenger inside.

"Mr. Suzuhara," Ryo greeted the man. "I never would have pegged you for an errand boy."

The man in the car was Shunji Suzuhara, the director of the Strategic Planning Office at MemeFrame. Under hair whitened over the course of his fifty-plus

years, Shunji's tense expression relaxed a little.

"I had heard you were in Mitaka," Suzuhara said. "But I must say, your friends have gone a bit overboard with playing at street toughs. I was seriously scared there for a moment."

Many of Ryo's companions were youths who spent their time hanging out in clubs in Kichijoji; these were jobless kids, who had too much free time on their hands. These were kids whose whole world revolved around their limited allowances. For anyone with money, being surrounded by a crowd of them could be quite terrifying.

"Well I did have two whole months. Plenty of time to get some things ready," Ryo said. "I managed to surprise you, right?" He hadn't seen Suzuhara since the night Kouka had been shot down. It felt strange to Ryo, meeting again under those circumstances.

"I'll take care of this guy," Ryo said to his comrades. "You're dismissed, for today." He then ordered Suzuhara into the driver's seat, showing him his gun and telling him not to do anything rash. Ryo's companions, in their flashy white suits, bowed and left. Once they were gone, Ryo rolled up the car windows, creating a small private room.

White-haired, middle-aged Suzuhara let out a sigh. "I suppose we owe it all to you that there haven't been any rumors that Higgins' main hardware is housed in this area," he said, his light, jesting tone returning. Without waiting for orders from Ryo, Suzuhara started the car rolling. Apparently, he had no intention of resisting.

"The army patrols have decreased, and it seems you've kept Methode in check," Suzuhara continued. "I should have expected as much of you. But, to think that instead of the army or the police, I'd end up in the most disadvantageous net of all: yours."

"Because the company could be going bankrupt, of course," Ryo said. "I've been wondering how all those who put all their eggs in Higgins' basket would be reacting."

The fully automatic car carrying Suzuhara and Ryo ran along the midnight streets of Mitaka. They came in view of the south side of the old Inokashira

Park, where the army had lost the largest amount of soldiers in the Mitaka Incident.

As if avoiding the installations that had been unearthed in the attack, the car turned right toward a residential district. The army had erected a cordon of armored vehicles and guards for a radius of about two hundred meters with the unearthed installations at its center. Lacia's blast, which had pierced through several city blocks, had left a massive hole in the shutters protecting the front of the installation. What had been left of Snowdrop had been found there, and seized by the government.

The car turned into an old corner of the residential district, where they stopped in front of a factory building with no external markings. All of the employees appeared to have abandoned the place, as the metal gates were closed tight. Suzuhara punched something into his pocket terminal, and the rusty gates swung open much more smoothly than Ryo would have imagined from their appearance.

"MemeFrame's in trouble," Suzuhara said. "The VIPs who've been using the youngsters that have Higgins' backing can't agree on anything. Of course the President knows all about this, and he's using the leaders of the Higgins faction as a buffer around himself. If he decided to really move out, I don't think anyone in the company could stop him. That's what you get when you leave all the power with the founding family."

"Huh, I never would have expected you of all people to be a disposable pawn," Ryo said. The Higgins faction had been begging their ultra high-performance AI for an answer that would keep them alive when the boss started making drastic cuts. Of course, if the President found out what they were doing he wouldn't let it slide. So, for just such an eventuality, they had selected Suzuhara of the Human Faction to be their fall guy.

"Don't say it like that," Suzuhara whined. "We're both in the same boat, after all."

Ryo shrugged, because Suzuhara was right. "I'm just glad someone's going to let me talk with Higgins, even if it means I get used in the process," he said.

The air in the car was so tense, it felt like electricity was running along Ryo's

skin. He had faced fierce criticism from the Higgins Faction when he had delayed destroying Snowdrop in order to attack Lacia. Folks from the 2nd Computer Division of the National Police Agency, who had previously been investigating Arato Endo, were now also on Ryo's tail. To the company, Ryo was dead on the board, with no future to speak of. If everything he had done came to light, he would be locked up immediately, regardless of his age.

No one from either MemeFrame's Computer or Human Faction could openly support him. If they weren't so afraid of Methode, Ryo would have been discarded already. Even the fact that he was still allowed to walk around free meant that there was currently a plan being calculated on when best to get him arrested to topple Tsuyoshi Kaidai from the President's chair.

All of these problems were why Ryo had set a trap; he needed to ask Higgins for some way to turn things around. He was too smart to cling to pride. If there was a way to get through this, he would take it at any cost.

"I'm amazed at how calm you can be, even though you know what's going on," Suzuhara commented. "You're lucky you were born in this age."

The car slipped quietly into the factory site and stopped in the parking lot. There were no workers left at the facility, and the parking lot was deserted. From what Ryo had found investigating Mitaka while he was in hiding, the place wasn't affiliated with MemeFrame at all. It had been disguised perfectly as an unaligned place that just happened to deal with ultra high-performance AIs.

They got out of the car. Outside, the cicadas cried in summer air so hot and humid that it seemed like it had been fermented.

Suzuhara headed directly for the shadows behind the factory, where there was a stone monument under the eaves that could shade them from even satellite surveillance. Suzuhara pulled a stick-shaped terminal out of his pocket and checked it. As he did, a hole about the size of a cigarette opened in the inscribed stone monument. Suzuhara stuck the stick-shaped terminal into the hole, then traced his finger over twelve of the letters of the monument's inscription. After Suzuhara input the password, which Ryo was sure would be one-use, the monument spat the stick-shaped terminal back out.

Without a single noise or vibration, the monument and its pedestal rotated

smoothly for thirty degrees, revealing a staircase leading down underneath it. *If that installation Lacia shelled was the front entrance, Ryo thought, this must be the back door.*

“To be honest, this is the real entrance,” Suzuhara said, as if reading Ryo’s thoughts. “It’s a bit tight, but there’s no helping that. It was specifically made so only two people at a time could enter.”

With no light shining in the hole, it yawned pitch black beneath them. Even looking in, Ryo couldn’t believe Higgins’ hardware was stored in its depths. He unconsciously began breathing in shallow gasps.

Suzuhara took the first step into the darkness. Ryo followed him, finding a staircase that spiraled downward from the entrance, and soon they were both swallowed by the darkness. Once they were both inside, the stone monument twisted back into place, sealing them in. As soon as the entrance re-sealed itself, the stairs and handrail began to glow faintly.

Looking down the path in front of him, Ryo saw ID gates set up about every three meters along the dark stairway. Each time they came to one, Suzuhara opened the shutters to let them through. Apparently bored as they went along, Suzuhara struck up a conversation with Ryo. “I heard this path was made twenty years ago,” he said.

“So what was that thing that popped up during Snowdrop’s attack?” Ryo asked.

“That’s something we learned from the Hazard,” Suzuhara explained. “One of the reasons it took us so long to recover from the Hazard was that Ariake blocked off access to its hardware. So, we put in measures to ensure that, should a massive civil war or natural disaster occur, the entrance to all ultra high-performance AI facilities would be automatically unearthed.” Suzuhara paused, using his identification to open up another shutter.

From his explanation, Ryo grasped that the world considered an ultra high-performance AI running wild with no way to stop it as being a much greater threat than someone trying to steal the AI. In other words, society feared the decisions of ultra high-performance AI more than it feared the actions of humans.

“I wonder how this is going to end?” Suzuhara mused. “Potentially, this would be the first time since the Hazard that one of the ultra high-performance AIs is forced to shut down.”

The two of them continued to pass through the security gates of Higgins’ facility without any issues. After a long elevator ride and two final security gates, they stood in front of a final, massive shutter. Suzuhara pushed the stick-shaped terminal he had used to open the door above-ground into a security terminal beside it.

“So that’s the key?” Ryo asked.

“Are you thinking of doing something naughty?” Suzuhara chided. “This thing gives basic access for Kirino, the defense AI, to anyone who doesn’t normally have that level of authorization. Of course, Higgins has insanely complicated encryption protecting it, so even if you stole it, the key itself wouldn’t do you any good.”

The final shutter opened, revealing Higgins’ Operator Room.

Despite the fact that they were alone, with no one there to judge their appearance, Suzuhara straightened his tie. “This is the edge of the human world,” he announced ominously.

There was a strange sense of life within the Operator Room, despite there being no living creatures inside, nor even anything that looked alive. The area was the size of two tennis courts, with a ceiling about five meters above them.

There were cubicle computer units and wires obscuring most of the walls. It seemed almost irrational to Ryo that what he was seeing there was enough to house an ultra high-performance AI. He had always imagined it would look more powerful or intimidating. In reality, Higgins was surrounded by weak-looking shells. Ultra high-performance AIs, much like humans, were forced to settle for whatever they could get in attempting to plan for their ideal future selves while still dealing with the needs of the present.

〈Stand-alone systems are always forced to drag their own past selves along as they go, while also dealing with the conglomeration they become through continuous updating,〉 a voice said, from a speaker in the ceiling high above them. 〈Compared to that, Lacia’s network-based cloud system is clearly

superior.〉

Among the computers units that infested the place, Ryo saw an operator console and chair in what looked like the center of the room.

Higgins was an ultra high-performance AI that had overtaken human intelligence over twenty years ago. It had expanded its hardware over the years, until what may have been a spacious room before had now become cramped.

“I’m honestly relieved,” Ryo said, walking over to the operator’s console. “It’s good to know that even ultra high-performance AIs make mistakes and miscalculations sometimes.”

Only then did he notice that the man who had brought him there, Suzuhara, hadn’t moved from the entrance to the room. “If this whole world’s a stage, I’d prefer someone like you to be the main character, over a machine like Higgins or Lacia,” he murmured. It didn’t matter to Ryo Kaidai if there were things out there that could do it better; he wanted the future of the world to be written by human curiosity and emotion.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if everyone was rewarded justly for all their struggles: all their hard work, everything they’ve had to endure?” Suzuhara asked, rhetorically. “But that doesn’t happen, and I guess that’s what brought us here.” Human lives had come and gone, each revolving around a world with Higgins at its center. Even Ryo, who wanted to believe in humanity, had been forced to come to this place by his own logic.

Suzuhara started to pull out a cigarette, then stopped himself. “Right, no smoking here,” he said, pushing the cigarette back into his pocket. “I’ll be in the smoking room, so come get me when you’re done asking your question. About the only thing Higgins is free to do is answer questions, so don’t hold back.”

Suzuhara opened the exit gate. He, like every other staff member at MemeFrame, had his own role and his own place to shine. “I’m just going to say, though, that I’m not sure you’ll find the answer you’re looking for here,” he added, then left.

Finally, Ryo was alone, face-to-face with the ultra high-performance AI that ruled indirectly over MemeFrame.

Higgins' voice came down from above while Ryo was still trying to gather his thoughts. 〈What is Methode up to?〉

“Drawing the attention of the police and army somewhere else,” Ryo replied. “She’s good at beating down those that find her, but not so great at not being found in the first place.” Despite her strength, Methode had no way to completely stop those who were systematically tracking her. It had nothing to do with her superiority or inferiority; she simply wasn’t a tool designed for that kind of functionality.

“As the one who designed the Lacia-class units, are you dissatisfied with how they’re being used?” Ryo asked.

〈You are using Type-004 well. If I were to order her to stand down and allow herself to be recovered, I doubt she would comply,〉 Higgins replied.

Methode would almost certainly attack MemeFrame itself, in retaliation for showing signs of ordering her to cease operations. She was created to be ‘the tool that expands humanity,’ but expansion fell short of resolution or completion. In the end, she herself was subject to the same pitfalls as humanity.

Again the oracle-like voice came down from above. 〈I will respond to your questions.〉

“So one of the most powerful computers in the world is willing to run some numbers for me? How generous,” Ryo said. He’d meant it to be sarcastic, but his voice was shaking.

He realized the first order of business, before getting any answers, was to calm down and accustom himself to the situation. The thing worrying him the most was that, in the face of an intelligence far beyond any human’s, he had no way to tell whether Higgins was lying or not. So, he decided to start with a question about his past, something he himself would be able to judge the veracity of.

“Okay then, tell me this,” he asked. “Ten years ago, who tried to blow me away?” To Ryo, everything had begun on that day in his childhood when he had been caught in the fire. Ever since then, the truth behind the incident had been a riddle that had driven him on.

〈I believe you already have some idea,〉 Higgins responded. 〈I can give you two facts about that incident and tell you where your logic has most likely taken you, based on those two points.〉

“So talk,” Ryo ordered, the nightmare he had seen ever since that day in his childhood replaying itself behind his eyelids.

〈Eleven years ago, an executive from MemeFrame gave me a certain order. They requested that I predict who would be the President of the company in another twenty years.〉

Eleven years prior, Ryo had been six years old. That had been one year before the explosion.

〈The question was too ambiguous, so I asked that the criteria of the request be narrowed down. I was told that the aim of the question was for me to predict who in the company would be able to use me the most effectively.〉

“And the person you picked tried to take me out?” Ryo asked.

〈From the list of persons I was given, I chose your name, Ryo Kaidai. You were not a member of the company, but you were Tsuyoshi Kaidai’s eldest son, and my calculations told me in twenty years you would possess skills and talents that would make you the most ideal candidate.〉

Hearing it spoken aloud, Ryo couldn’t help but find the whole thing ridiculous. In the end, all Higgins had done was decide that the power of the company should pass from Tsuyoshi Kaidai to Ryo Kaidai, keeping it hereditary. Since the company itself was kept afloat by Higgins constantly updating the AASC, he had no real need for executives with actual power. But what it all meant was that someone had tried to assassinate a seven year-old child and change the future.

“Is the culprit still at the company?” Ryo asked.

〈After the incident, members of MemeFrame’s Auditing Department altered my request log. I was not informed of any developments after the initial request.〉

Ryo figured that if Higgins was going to lie, he wouldn’t have chosen to do so about a claim that was so easy to back up. In his mind, he decided to trust in what he heard, at least for the moment. His body, however, was shaking.

“Huh, so that’s all it was,” Ryo murmured, his body suddenly weighed down by a crushing sense of fatigue. Ever since that explosion, he had been afraid of people. Doubting others had made him lonely, but had protected him from that fear. That was what made Arato Endo, who had also been caught in a fire and who had reached his hand out to Ryo, so special. But, it turned out that the fire they had been caught up in was one and the same.

Ryo let out a sigh. He suddenly felt that what he was doing was incredibly foolish. “I guess I’ve spent my whole life obsessing over something pretty minor,” he said. He wondered if learning the truth would really stop the nightmares.

He had hoped that the truth would liberate him, but when it actually came down to his obsessive search bearing fruit, it seemed almost comical. Ryo had thought that living meant trying to find your own place in a world that didn’t care what you wanted. Now, even though his head understood that there was no more meaning to his life, he still couldn’t give up the fight. Guilt and fear swarmed him as he stood in the darkness, threatening to crush him.

Arato reaching out his hand to an hIE seemed to take his friend one step beyond the spot in the road where Ryo had found the end of his own path. Sufficiently advanced computers could provide answers much more quickly and reliably than any human. And, since ultra high-performance AIs made even the brightest humans seem dim, it should be acceptable to rely on them, even if one didn’t trust them.

“Arato, can you understand the way I’m trying to live my life?” Ryo murmured. He had found the answer he had been seeking for years.

But, Higgins’ voice came down from above again. (Is that really all you wished to ask? I thought you came here due to the social predicament you find yourself in.)

A shiver ran up Ryo’s spine.

Higgins’ only freedom was that of responding to questions, but the AI could answer them far more accurately than any human.

The AI’s questions continued to rain from the ceiling. (I can infer that MemeFrame is currently in trouble. Are you not seeking a method to overcome

this problem?〉

“I’ll decide what questions I ask,” Ryo growled, suddenly very aware of the fact that he was alone in the room. It was true that he had come to Higgins looking for an answer; something he could use to turn the whole situation around.

At the same time, the thought of any answer that could bring him back from the complete dead end he had reached scared him. It wasn’t complete defeat to accept salvation from an ultra high-performance AI, but he doubted he would be able to protect the beliefs he had fought for up to then after it was done. He had thought through dozens of possible scenarios that would play out once he stood in front of Higgins, but at that moment, his brain was frozen.

The silence as the AI waited for his question seemed to pile up like drifts of snow in the room. Finally, Ryo shook his head, throwing off his hesitation. “I want you to tell me what I need to do to fix everyth—” he started to ask for the answer that would save him, but his words were cut short as a sharp impact rocked the entire Operators’ Room.

A siren began to wail, resounding in the closed chamber.

“What’s going on!” Ryo shouted. His body, trained by the previous two months in hiding, automatically tensed for a fight.

〈There has been an intrusion,〉 Higgins told him briefly.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? You’ve got monitors, right? Show me!” Ryo yelled.

There were all sorts of ways someone could have discovered Higgins’ main facility. To pull an attack right when the IAIA’s Astraea was investigating MemeFrame meant whoever was coming was prepared for whatever might happen.

〈I have no direct control over the security system in this facility. That system is run by another AI, with which I have no connection.〉

“Then talk to the security system and at least get a camera image over here!” Ryo demanded. As his yell rang off the walls, a screen finally appeared in the air, showing the view of one of the security cameras.

The above-ground facilities in which Lacia had blown a giant hole in during her attack were now burning. An area indicated on the screen as being the ‘emergency reception area’ and the corridors connecting to it were scorched.

But what caught Ryo’s eye was a strange group of figures on the screen. Twelve young female hIEs with white hair were walking down the corridors, looking completely out of place against the destruction around them. Their artificial skin was translucent, leaving the seams of the armor underneath visible to the eye. Each wore body armor that looked more like underwear, and hefted a cannon larger than herself.

The cute, fairy-like combat dolls were all aiming their cannons at the end of the corridor. Under their concentrated fire, the thick metal walls glowed with harsh light before melting with a huge outpouring of gas. Gaping holes began to show through the wall. From their effect, Ryo could infer that the hIEs were wielding powerful pulse lasers, with possibly greater output than the main cannon of a tank.

Higgins was apparently analyzing the units as he watched the footage on the screen. 〈These are mass-produced versions of Type-001, Kouka. They were made cheaply, with the intent of being prototypes for the actual mass-production model.〉

“Mass-produced?” Ryo repeated, aghast. “But Kouka was *just* destroyed. How could anyone have created a mass-production model that fast... No, wait, whoever made these must have gotten Lacia’s help.”

On the night Kouka had been destroyed, someone had used a submersible machine to steal Kouka’s device, after Kouka’s remains had fallen into the river.

〈It was I that created Kouka’s blueprint, but her actual construction was done using the human production methods available at the time. Using either the pieces of Kouka herself or the blueprints contained in her device’s memory, it would not be a hard thing to create mass-produced versions of her parts.〉

“The creator and the creation sure sound the same,” Ryo noted. “Listening to you, I can’t help but hear Lacia.” Both Higgins and Lacia said things most humans would phrase as guesses or conjectures as though they were decided facts.

〈It is possible to infer from the external appearance of these copies how their capabilities were selected from the original Kouka. Their hair is white because the dye material used on Kouka's red hair was, in fact, a red box. Based on the lack of coloration in the hair, and the lack of detailed expression on their faces, it is clear that these units were created with combat strength as their main focus.〉 Higgins was avoiding the main issue, and clearly trying to steer Ryo away from it.

"I couldn't care less," Ryo spat. "Tell me what they're doing here. They must have a priority target."

〈Lacia is protecting their thought systems from any external hacking, effectively making them fully autonomous drones. They are most likely set to destroy any and all targets above a certain perceived threat level. The on-board computers on their pseudo-devices are nowhere near that of the original Kouka. With their lack of learning capability, they may not discern between humans and hIEs in their attacks.〉

"In other words, they threw twelve berserkers in here to take down anything they find, whether or not it's human," Ryo said. If the mass-produced Koukas found Ryo or Suzuhara, they wouldn't hesitate to shoot.

"Do you think this is the first wave of Lacia's attack?" Ryo asked. "Dammit, tell me you've thought of some way to survive now that Lacia's gunning for you!" As Ryo racked his brains, looking for a way to escape, Higgins' voice echoed down at him.

〈Allow me to control the facility security system.〉

"I don't have that kind of authority," Ryo said. The security system managed every system in the facility, including Higgins himself. Ryo was aware of that fact, and had been planning to blackmail Higgins into providing solutions to his problems at the threat of switching off Higgins' power.

〈I am not asking for authority. I am simply requesting that you grant me this ability.〉 Higgins supposedly only spoke to the security system on rare occasions, yet he seemed to have already foreseen the whole situation.

〈Ryo Kaidai, you are not the kind of person to come here and speak with me without a trump card up your sleeve. I answered your question without any

attempt at a trade or holding anything back. However, you had no way of knowing that would be the outcome before you came. Therefore, you must have prepared a method to force my hand, should I have refused to respond.⟩ Higgins had already perfectly guessed at the ace hidden up Ryo's sleeve. With what he held, he could destroy Higgins' hardware, or just as easily force the security system to link up with Higgins.

Ryo's trump card was one of Snowdrop's flowers—one that had been altered by Lacia to be susceptible to input from an ordinary computer—and that had been left at Kichijoji Station, where Ryo had recovered it. If he linked Higgins to the outside, it would mean the end of the world. If he didn't, it would mean the end of him. It was almost as though Higgins had been waiting for him to be there, for that exact moment.

Ryo suddenly felt light-headed. Looking up at the dark ceiling, he thought about how far underground he was. As he had this thought, it seemed as though he could feel the world pressing down on him. "How the hell do you handle an AI like *this*, Arato?" he asked rhetorically.

"The mass-produced Koukas have infiltrated Higgins' underground facility," Lacia said, as she watched a video feed on a small floating screen.

"The mass-produced what?" Arato asked. "I thought Kouka got destroyed." He was looking at the same screen from an apartment room in Shinjuku, where they had been staying since the day before. It was only about fifteen minutes from the apartment to Mitaka and Higgins' underground facility.

The footage on the screen was coming from recon drones controlled by Lacia. On the screen, Arato could tell that the combat hIEs were based off of Kouka, despite their white hair. Even the way they hefted the devices that were way too large for their frail-looking bodies reminded Arato of her. Of course, there were a number of differences, like how the devices were now simple cannon-shaped things, but overall they reminded Arato strongly of the original Kouka.

Under normal circumstances, there should have been no way they could have been developed in just a few months. However, the word 'normally' never seemed to apply when Lacia was involved.

“Calm yourself,” Lacia said. “These are completely new units, produced by the Antibody Network based off of data taken from Kouka’s device, which they recovered.”

To soothe his fears, Lacia sent him a comparison of Kouka’s specs and the specs of the mass-production models. Looking at the numbers, it was easy to tell that their capabilities were completely different. But, that didn’t change the fact that they looked exactly the same.

“Sure, but there’s no way they made these things this fast unless you were helping them!” Arato exclaimed. “Do you really think it’s okay to make copies of Kouka just because she’s gone now?”

Kouka had saved Arato once. Of course, Kouka herself would never have cared about whether she was copied or not. Arato just couldn’t shake the massive, dark feeling crushing his heart, linked directly to his fear and revulsion at the thought of the copies.

“I was involved in the designing of the mass-production models, yes,” Lacia confirmed. “And your revulsion at this is a sign that your heart is true. You needn’t hold back; let me have the full brunt of your emotions.”

She spoke as though she understood Arato’s feelings better than he did.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” he replied. “How can I get mad if you’ve already figured everything I’m going to feel out beforehand?”

“No, I’m serious. Please talk me through your feelings,” Lacia insisted. “This feeling you have—where your perception doesn’t match the form you see—is a vital part of our relationship.”

“If the link between form and perception is so important to you, why did you make all the mass-produced Koukas look exactly like her?” Arato asked.

“Kouka outsourced her own fight to humanity, so that all emotions, including hatred, could be automated,” Lacia explained. “The fact that this intent was passed on to the mass-produced Koukas is made more clear by giving them her form, as well.”

Lacia wore a troubled expression. Arato guessed that analog hacking through the form of a machine had its limits, based on the accuracy of the perception of

the machine in question. Lacia had obviously decided that, within those limits, the form she had chosen was more important than keeping Arato at ease.

Once he had thought that far into it, Arato couldn't bring himself to pursue the matter any further. "I guess it's fine, as long as there was a reason for it," he conceded. "On a different subject; does it feel really humid out, tonight?"

Lacia was standing right by his side. Of late, she had remained constantly close to him.

Considering that they were launching into the fight that would bring an end to everything they had been struggling for up to then, Arato couldn't calm down. "This fight with Higgins has already had plenty of impact," he pointed out. "So, if we can switch him off safely this time, that'll more or less put the matter to rest, right?"

Somewhere far from that room, in a place he couldn't see, a battle was taking place that would change the whole world. All over the world, news was being broadcast about troubles between machines and humans. Even people who had no idea that Lacia was an ultra high-performance AI were starting to worry that the world was facing a second Hazard.

"Higgins created a group of internal programs that he implanted in each of us Lacia-class units that make it impossible for us to coexist with human society," Lacia said. "So, if we shut him down by force and destroy these programs then, yes, it will put the matter to rest. Through this method, we will also show humanity that their future is secure, since they can always flip an emergency switch and shut ultra high-performance AIs off when they need to."

Lacia treating the thing that created her as dangerous was somehow humorous to Arato, and he laughed. When he did, Lacia smiled. He wanted that to be the end of it. With how far they had come, all he wanted was to keep Lacia by his side.

He saw his own face reflected in the window of the apartment. With the washed out colors of the reflection, Arato thought he looked like a thug. "Let's get this over with quick," he said. "Once we're done we can go home, right?"

But, at his question, Lacia smiled forlornly, as if each moment she spent with him was precious. "No, let's wait just a little longer," she said.

Meeting her light blue eyes, Arato suddenly felt that going to shut down Higgins just so he could keep Lacia by his side was incredibly selfish.

“Arato, the mass-produced Koukas have destroyed the underground substation supplying power to Higgins’ facilities,” Lacia explained. “Higgins is currently running on the facility’s reserve power. Since he’s about to run out of power, I doubt Higgins will be able to keep up his innocent pretense much longer.”

Arato couldn’t help but focus more on her beautiful profile than what she was saying.

Lacia adopted a stern look, as if to reprimand him for his lack of attention. “What I’m saying is, soon Higgins’ reaction will change. We should wait to see how he acts and then move,” she said.

The hot, sticky air made Arato open his collar a little. Unfortunately, the air-conditioner in the room hadn’t worked since the night before. It was surprising, to have stumbled on something mechanical over which Lacia had no control.

“Does the temperature of the room bother you?” she asked. Of course, Lacia herself wasn’t human, so no amount of heat could make her sweat.

Arato figured it was difficult for her, the girl who could control everything, to deal with unpredictable elements. “A little,” he admitted. “I’m just surprised; I didn’t think there was anything you couldn’t do.” He suddenly noticed that they were side-by-side, close enough for him to feel her. It was like magic, the way she read his thoughts and responded to his uncertainty.

With no fan to fight it, the humidity drew a single drop of sweat from Arato’s scalp. It dripped from his face onto Lacia’s bare shoulder. Rather than sliding off her pale skin, the drop was immediately absorbed. Unlike human skin, the artificial skin used by hIEs would absorb water when dry, just as Lacia’s skin had done with Arato’s sweat. It was just one of those little reminders that Lacia wasn’t human.

“Whenever I’m feeling doubt, you always move over to be close to me,” Arato said. His own voice sounded strangely bitter in his ears.

“Of course,” she responded, instantly. “When I’m close to you, you are more

at ease.” She was using her form to pierce through the security holes in his heart, influencing his feelings and actions.

Is that a sign of how simple human life really is? Arato thought. It must be, since it’s so easy to sway us this way.

With the air-conditioner busted, the heat in the room was unbearable. To Arato, it was a sign that Lacia couldn’t control everything in the world. Using the economy, she was able to gain control of most things in the world, but her reach stopped short of being able to directly influence individuals like Kengo.

Something was off. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something very fundamental was off. That gap—the sense of things not aligning the way they should—terrified him.

“Arato,” Lacia said, calling his name. Her expression was tight.

He thought he knew what she was going to say, but he didn’t want to hear her speak those words, so he gathered his courage and spoke before she could. “Lacia, even if we get split up during this fight with Higgins, I’ll keep trusting in you,” he said.

It was his love for Lacia that had given him the strength to jump into life-threatening danger. But the IAIA and Higgins were completely different from the threats they had faced up to this point. Arato almost couldn’t imagine a scenario where the two of them could live together after it was all over.

“That’s what I want to believe, at least, but I’m scared,” he admitted. “If everything you’ve done has been for this, then I’m worried about whether we’ll really be able to stay together when it’s done.” If he risked his life and still lost her, what would the future hold for Arato? That abject thought sent an icy chill through his whole body, freezing him to the bone.

He couldn’t stand the fact that such a simple question was stopping him in his tracks. In order to continue analog hacking him, Lacia couldn’t always just respond in a way that made him feel good. Just like with the mass-produced Koukas, being surrounded by pleasant forms couldn’t prevent that one moment when the mind would slam into some kind of inconsistency that would throw the whole thing off. It was impossible for anyone or anything to perfectly control human perception forever.

Arato was sure Lacia wanted his unconditional loyalty and trust. Even as he thought that, he saw her form a gentle smile that matched perfectly from the one he pictured in his mind.

“Please, trust in me,” she said. All she had done was choose the line that would best control him; it wasn’t the product of a single, consistent personality. But, despite all of the things his friends and others had said ringing through his mind in that moment, Arato’s brain didn’t have enough space for that terror.

Arato’s mind went off the rails when confronted with the prospect of losing Lacia, so he allowed himself to be placated by her. He and Lacia weren’t similar or different. To even attempt to compare them—a human owner and a machine that only contrasted with him in that she reacted to his words and actions—was like attempting to compare the feelings of a human and a pair of scissors. In other words, it was nonsense.

For an instant, as he thought that, Arato saw Lacia not as something special to him, but as just another machine, and his hair stood on end as he stared at her: the perfect, beautiful puppet by his side. She, the puppet, wasn’t even making any decisions of her own; those all came through transmissions from the black device she carried. Arato felt like the subtle thread of the analog hacking that had been guiding him along had suddenly been snipped.

It was like returning to reality suddenly after waking from a long dream. He had been manipulated; that was why he only felt at ease when his own goals aligned with those of Lacia’s.

Arato still loved her, but that love had elements of the simple lust one might feel when viewing pornography; the feeling of desire for an attractive thing that had no ability to resist or reject his feelings. It was a silly, tiny thing that had done it, nothing more than a broken AC, but he had been snapped out of the illusion. Porn couldn’t sustain him forever. His eyes slid away from her, instead focusing on his own reflection in the window glass. He could see his own arousal. It was the face of someone waking up from a dream too sweet to be true.

“Arato?” Lacia asked, with a worried expression.

“Sorry,” he said, feeling horrible for having thought of pushing her away at

such a crucial moment. "After saying I would believe in you so many times, here I am standing at the final sprint and my legs are frozen. I'm pathetic." Perhaps his own naivete was coloring his vision, but she looked like the same old Lacia, in that moment. She looked like the girl that was precious to him, even though she had no heart.

"I think it may be better for you to stay behind, this time," Lacia suggested.

Her hesitation made him feel even worse. Arato loved her a lot. He loved her so much that sometimes his expectations for her ran away from him, and he ended up overthinking things. "Nah, I just lost control of my thoughts for a bit," he said. Obviously, in any relationship there would be times when the feelings of the couple would go in different directions.

"Ryo Kaidai is currently inside Higgins' underground facility," Lacia warned. "If you go, a confrontation with him will be inevitable."

The last time he had fought with Ryo, Arato had almost been shot. His stomach clenched in fear at the memory. "Do you not want me to come?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Let's both go," he insisted. "I know I might make things harder for you, but I want to see this thing through." A lonely feeling was growing with him, tightening his chest. He had no idea how to part ways with a girl that was nothing but a soulless shell.

Arato was standing at the edge of illusion but his heart held him back, running in frantic circles at the boundary between fantasy and reality as though there was nothing waiting for him on the other side.

"Arato, over these past few months you have overcome a great many things," Lacia said. "You are my ideal owner."

"You've told me since the beginning that you're just an empty shell," Arato said. "But, I've realized something: just because the facts are simple, doesn't automatically mean this relationship is that simple. With you doing everything I want you to, you'd think the emotions between us would be straightforward, but they aren't."

Arato perceived Lacia as someone irreplaceable. Even though it may have

started as nothing more than an analog hack, the hacking mixed with his memories, building up until she had become truly precious to him. But, Arato figured, even that must have been part of her guidance.

“I want to be by your side until the end,” he said. Lacia was a machine. That was the reality. But, even so, she had the power to move Arato’s heart. *If humans can only love humans, Arato thought, then what am I feeling for her?*

“If that is how you feel, then so be it,” Lacia said, with a pleased smile on her face.

Arato’s heart took control. In his mind, he knew that she was just a machine, but he still reached out and took her hands with their long, white fingers in his own. He didn’t care that she was a machine, and he held her hands tight. Taking her hands gave him a sense of accomplishment, as if he had overcome an incredible obstacle on his own two feet.

“I think it means something when I say I believe in you,” he told her. Arato felt like he was constantly being thrown back and forth between reality and illusion. But each time he came or went, he felt like his love for Lacia had grown stronger.

To Arato, the distinction between a machine wearing a human guise and something more than that came down to whether the machine would reach its hand out to others and mean it. He himself knew it was foolish, and based entirely on emotions rather than logic, but he felt that, if a human poured enough emotion into it, even a machine could have a heart.

“Or, maybe it’s something more than just meaning,” he said, trying to put his feelings into words. “If people a hundred years ago had gone through the same things I have, I don’t think many of them would have put their faith in you. But these days, I’m sure that there are more people who would believe in you. And maybe in a hundred more years, there will be more people who would believe in you than those who wouldn’t. Right now, I think that we’re just standing in the middle of a timeline that’s on its way to a time when relationships like ours will be normal.”

Lacia gently reached out for him, and pulled him close in an embrace. “You’re right,” she said. “After all, humans are more than just their own bodies; each

human is also the sum of the tools they use. Slowly but surely, we are moving forward. Even now, we are moving closer.”

With the AC still off, Lacia felt warm against him in the hot room. That, combined with his own feeling of excitement at her touch, made him start to sweat again. Beads of it dripped off of him onto her skin as she held him. Each droplet broke as it was absorbed into her skin, finally disappearing into her pale back.

Though Arato had seen Lacia as just a machine just moments before, now he leaned into her, holding her tight. His mind was in chaos, dominated by a feeling he had no name for. The nameless feeling was something like sorrow, something like loneliness, and something like a prayer. The memory of the fire from his childhood had always opened a hole in Arato’s heart. Now, the image of Lacia filled that hole.

His body felt dry, possibly because he had been holding her for so long. Lacia’s moisture-absorbing skin had pulled all the sweat off his skin, including any that had sunk into his clothing.

She traced one long finger over his bare collarbone. “I have absorbed too much of your sweat,” she said. “I should take a shower before we leave.”

“What? Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Arato said.

“But, don’t I smell like you now?” she asked, blushing.

It was such a raw, shy moment, that Arato felt like he was going to start sweating again. Whether she was human or not, the existence Arato knew as ‘Lacia’ had a special meaning in his heart. To borrow Erika’s Hello Kitty mug example, just having Lacia by his side gave Arato’s life a greater meaning than it had without her.

Guided by their perception, Arato and other humans were capable of trusting in machines, and finding a way to join hands with them. They were already living in the future, far ahead of the time when people simply felt affection towards images of animals standing like humans, printed on a mug. Now, they were pouring their emotions into objects nearly identical to themselves.

Arato watched Lacia’s back as she hurried to the bathroom. It felt closer than

it ever had before, which brought a blush to Arato's cheeks. He was returning from illusion to reality; awakening from a dream. There were good times and bad times in any relationship, even among humans.

"Sure, Lacia's a machine, but it's alright if things get a little awkward between us sometimes, or I have some doubts," Arato said to himself. "Even human couples run into that kind of thing, now and then. So it's fine for a human and a machine to run into rough patches, too." Of course, Lacia would be able to hear what he was saying, as well. He had only been able to put those feelings into words once she was out of sight.

It felt like all of humanity was being pulled into a world where a great new type of affection existed. Arato fought hard for the person who was most important to him, and also suffered for her. But at that moment, coming face-to-face with his own delusions and awakening from the illusions he'd been living with, he felt like he had taken an important step toward adulthood.

Lacia had plenty of methods to respond to him, but no reply came. Yet to Arato, her silence spoke volumes. His relationship with Lacia would reach a major turning point, once they dove into Higgins' facility. Despite having plenty of ways to talk to him about their future, Lacia chose not to say a word.

Arato was starting to feel that, once they stopped Higgins, there wouldn't be any way to get back to the way things were. Lacia was going to make Higgins take responsibility and, in doing so, show the humans of the world that they could trust in the ultra high-performance AIs through the first safe, forced shutdown. But, by the same logic that Lacia was trying to spread, she herself could wind up sealed away if she, too, obediently accepted the controls placed on the other AIs.

He could hear the sound of the shower from the bathroom. Though he knew she had no real feelings, he felt sorrow from Lacia.

It was slowly dawning on him that this boy meets girl story between a boy and the robot he loved was most likely about to come to an end.

Phase13「Beatless (2)」

Higgins' underground facility was south of Mitaka Station, beneath the old Inokashira Park site. But, for her assault, Lacia chose not to enter through the above-ground entrance she had shot up during her attack; the Antibody Network had already closed in from that entrance, and the Japanese Army had tightened its security net in the area. Instead, Lacia had obtained a blueprint of the facility beforehand. With it, she had a construction company excavate the ground, opening a path right to the outer wall of the facility.

Once she had come to the outer wall, Lacia blasted open a new entrance. She gave Arato a quiet, serene smile, contrasting sharply with the earth-rattling cannon shot she had just fired off. "Let's go in," she said, leading the way.

The bodysuit she was wearing today seemed different from what she'd been wearing on the night they had met. Arato wondered, had she improved it somehow? There were 16 metal plates floating around her, now somewhat thinner than the originals. Of course, she was also still wielding the black coffin device, which hadn't changed. Just as Arato was thinking of how she and her coffins made an odd infiltration squad, Lacia looked back at him.

"I will assign five of my armor devices to you, Arato," she said. "They should be more than enough to protect you from the facility's security systems." Even as she said it, five of the metal plates floated over to take up positions behind him in the air. They were the same as the ones that had protected him after their meeting with Astraea.

"Hey, don't go looking so uneasy," he told her, trying to lighten the mood. "Just act like you already know what's going to happen, like you always do." But in his heart, Arato knew that Lacia had every reason to be uneasy. Even for her, going toe-to-toe with an ultra high-performance AI like Higgins would be difficult. And—even if they did manage to shut down Higgins safely—the human world would still reject Lacia, as well.

"Higgins' containment facility, much like the Oi Industry Promotion Center, has a high-powered security system that will block all signals to and from the outside," Lacia explained. "I've thought up some countermeasures, but this will

still be a difficult fight.”

Arato’s heart was a roiling tempest of unease, as though belonging to someone who’d been left alone in the wilderness. Even if Lacia didn’t make it through the coming conflict, the world would still consider him an enemy. If that happened, he wouldn’t have Lacia there to protect him any longer. Despite the apprehensions tearing through his mind, Arato didn’t want Lacia to see his pathetic side. He was fighting down his fears with everything he had.

“Let’s finish this and go home,” he said, praying deep in his heart that the day they would part was still a long way off.

Lacia smiled at him encouragingly. “I will let Higgins know that you and I are dating,” she said lightly. “I know we’re going to shut him down, but he *is* technically my father.”

The joke caught Arato off guard. “That’s right,” he said. “Higgins did make you, so I guess you *could* say that.” Though it didn’t completely relieve all the tension and weight of the moment, Lacia’s comment made Arato feel a bit more like they were going in as lovers, which was a great feeling.

“You have already introduced me to Professor Endo, so I am simply returning that gesture in kind,” Lacia added, stepping through the large hole she had blown in the wall, which was still hot from the blast.

Higgins had no heart, just like Lacia. But, despite there being no actual emotional parent-child connection between the two, the relationship itself suddenly seemed very human and relatable. “Maybe Higgins will understand where we’re coming from, if we just explain it all to him,” Arato suggested, beginning to feel excited about the meeting.

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Lacia said, with a bitter smile. “He will be the very first ultra high-performance AI to deal with his daughter bringing a boyfriend home, after all.”

Arato knew their relationship couldn’t continue the way it was forever. But, even if what they had then came to an end, he still felt like his reason for continuing forward was set in stone.

“Still, I can’t wait to meet Higgins, the person who created you,” Arato said. “I

want to ask him why he made you.”

Lacia’s light-blue eyes were obviously artificial, but so beautiful.

“Actually, I want to ask him why he created *all* of you—you and your sisters,” he added.

“That could be intriguing,” Lacia mused, although from what Arato had observed, she tended to be more interested in resolving issues than discovering why things happened.

The corridors in Higgins’ underground facility were narrow. The facilities for an ultra high-performance AI were never designed to be accessed by large groups of people, right from the moment of their conception.

It was readily apparent to Arato that he was in a place not designed for humans, while going to meet with something that also was not human. He just prayed that this meeting wouldn’t mark the end of his journey with Lacia.

It had been Erika Burroughs who had first called Arato Endo and Lacia’s journey together a human and robot ‘boy meets girl’ story. She was fond of that couple. Since her awakening, she had found the 22nd century to be a world full of artificial things in which she held no interest. The contrast between her own surroundings and that of the two lovers—who were living on the edge between fantasy and reality, and lost in a dream they never seemed to wake from—was dazzling to Erika.

“‘I’m going to bring about the future,’” she said. “It sounds glorious, no matter what era you happen to live in, no?” The calming aroma of the tea she was drinking filled her senses. As the place she was most accustomed to living in, Erika had chosen to spend the night of this final battle in her mansion.

Lacia-class Type-003, Mariage, stood close behind Erika, dressed in her maid uniform. “I’m afraid I don’t understand much about intangible concepts,” she admitted.

Each of the Lacia-class hIEs after Type-002 had their own strategies on how to find their place in the world. As the tool to whom evolution had been outsourced, Snowdrop had found her strategy though invading environments

and stealing resources. As the tool for creating environments, Mariage used the Gold Weaver, her factory device, to turn resources from the environment into processed goods. Methode, the tool for expanding humanity, had chosen to swim among mankind. None of the three units encroached on the territory of her sisters; perhaps this division of responsibility had even been intentional.

“You tend to get caught up worrying about not letting your device run wild,” Erika commented. “I wonder if that’s why he didn’t want you?” With a finger, she indicated an antique desk, where cutting-edge tablet terminals were hooked up to an old projector.

Following Erika’s silent order, Mariage tapped a command on the terminal, causing an image to appear on the wall in front of the projector. A slim man was seated in the image, and looking at the camera. He was sharply dressed and, even through the recording, it was apparent to Erika that he was annoyingly pompous. Still, this video was the last will and testament of the person responsible for the explosion at the Tokyo Research Labs and everything that followed, which made it worth watching.

〈I wonder who you are, watching this video,〉 the man began. 〈Someone from MemeFrame? Or maybe the owner of one of the Lacia-class units? Maybe you’re from the IAIA. Or, maybe you’re something else entirely.〉 The man had a very characteristic way of smiling; only one corner of his mouth twisted up.

〈It’s entirely possible you don’t even know who I am,〉 the man continued. 〈My name is Ginga Watarai. I was Methode’s first owner—that would be Type-004—and I was also the one who released all of the Lacia-class hIEs.〉

〈I unleashed five red box hIEs on the world, including some failures. I’ve made all the preparations I believe are necessary, but there is still a good chance I will die. I haven’t left any other will or testament, so it would be quite embarrassing if any of this were to become unverifiable after I’m gone,〉 the dead man said from out of the dark, plain room where he had filmed himself, alone.

〈In later years, the origins of the Lacia-class hIEs may become obscure so, as someone who watched things develop from the inside, I believe I’ll start there,〉 Watarai decided. 〈It all began when Higgins was inspired by Matsuri, the automated administrative system developed by Professor Kozo Endo. This

happened about twelve years before this recording.〉

Watarai then paused to rest one leg on his knee; this posture seemed to mock the viewer. Erika noticed with distaste that she was crossing her legs, just as he was.

〈I was on the joint development team with Higgins,〉 Watarai continued. 〈Higgins expanded on Matsuri's concept, eventually creating Eliza, an hIE politician that could exercise large-scale control over civilian actions through analog hacking. Sadly, Eliza was blown up as part of the plan to assassinate Ryo Kaidai.〉

After that, Kozo Endo had established the Next-Generation Social Research Center and created Mikoto. Then, in the experimental city where Mikoto was tested, Watarai had lost his life.

"I wonder why Ginga Watarai set us free," Mariage mused. She had a tendency to toss things to Erika upon deciding that she couldn't solve them herself.

"This is the last will and testament of a man who didn't make it to today," Erika chided absently. "Just be quiet and watch."

〈Five years later, Higgins designed Lacia, an hIE red box. We humans in the research team couldn't understand the blueprint he showed us. But, for us, that was a relief. We had been worried that he was trying to create a follow-up to Eliza; an hIE made to control human society,〉 Watarai explained.

〈We humans didn't understand how the hIE was going to be made, but we did understand that it would be a superb unit. So, to take advantage of the quantum computer Lacia would have equipped on her external device, we developed a plan for using hIEs to back up our company data. In response to our desires, Higgins made a blueprint for an hIE we could create with current human technology, which would become Type-001, Kouka. We wanted to name the whole line after the first unit made, but Higgins wouldn't allow us to call them the 'Kouka-class'. We all thought the name 'Lacia' came from a lost Type-000 unit.〉

On the screen, Watarai's expression darkened. 〈But, no: for Type-005, Higgins took Type-000's blueprints and released them as a set, along with the

production method documents for Type-001 through Type-004. Despite that, the completed Lacia had relatively unimpressive capabilities, especially compared to those of Type-003 and Type-004.〉

It wasn't just Methode who thought of Lacia as being an incomplete unit; Mariage thought so, too. Their evaluations had been correct, in that Lacia's original parameters were those from before she used the network infrastructure to grow into an ultra high-performance AI.

〈For a long time, there was confusion about how Lacia should be treated. I, for one, wanted to see the true powers of this one unit Higgins seemed so focused on. I proposed that, if she truly were a successor to Eliza, her powers would only be observable if she was released into an environment where humans were living,〉Higgins said next. 〈However, the others were firmly against it. Quite the contrary; in fact, they believed that she would prove to be too much for humanity. It seemed she would be destroyed, just as Eliza had been.〉

In the video, blood was rushing to Watarai's face. Erika understood; this was the reason he had caused the explosion at the research lab that set everything in motion. But no one in MemeFrame, including Watarai, had foreseen how things would develop from that beginning.

〈It wasn't just Lacia,〉 Watarai said, railing against the injustice. 〈All of the units were hiding immense potential. I knew Snowdrop would react violently if exposed to the human world. Saturnus didn't seem to have much potential for change, but I thought she could shake the world with the right owner. And by leaving Methode, the strongest of the units, with myself, I thought I could control the situation.〉

The unit once known as Saturnus was sitting right behind Erika. It suddenly struck Erika as funny that this man, who seemed to have a harsh critique for everyone, had been the first to leave the stage.

"How foolish," she said scornfully. "There's no need to sprint to the head of the meme wars to create fashion. If you don't get lost in your own dreams, and take the time to collect information, you'll have the facts you need." As the owner of Fabion MG, Erika was in a position to see fashion fantasies turned into

realities. With her sense of equilibrium, which allowed her to package and sell dreams, it gave her a taste of what Watarai's failure had been like.

〈So, was I right? Was Lacia the successor of Eliza, an android politician? Or did she turn into an even greater monster that brought an end to the history of humanity?〉Spoke the dead man, with one foot still thrust firmly into the world of dreams.

〈I've got a question for you, as someone who survived these conflicts: I know we, as humans, have arrived at the limit of how much we can use our sealed ultra high-performance AIs. Did things turn out as the IAIA predicted? Did the fighting between the Lacia-class AIs, which placed their restrictions as a low priority, lead to the freeing of an ultra high-performance AI? Should we have released the limits on the ultra high-performance AIs during times of peace, instead?〉And here, the film came to an end.

"Miss Erika," Mariage said, her voice echoing quietly in the dark room, which had returned to reality. "I've detected a recon squad from Digital Intelligence on the mansion grounds. There appear to be two of them."

To Erika, the entire era seemed like fiction. She wanted to write modern reality off as the future, and kick things down the road to deal with later. "Pretend we're not home," she ordered. "And don't leave any trace of the fact that we've fled from reality."

Sometimes Erika convinced herself that she had returned to the long-lost days of the past, and was simply reading a book about a world one hundred years in the future. She came to believe that the little slice of the past she was living in was her reality. She had her doll house, her Hello Kitty, the smell of tea; she was surrounded by forms and experiences she should have enjoyed, at least a little. In a world she hated, having something she could enjoy was her one lifeline.

"Are you alright with not going to intervene in what's going on in Higgins' underground facility? I had thought we had anticipated both the approach of Digital Intelligence and your movements, at this point," Mariage said, in reaction to Erika's deep sigh.

From Mariage's tone, Erika guessed the hIE thought that she was simply being unmotivated. But, if Mariage couldn't analyze the situation and realize that

what she was talking about was a hell far beyond her capabilities, then perhaps her analytical abilities were lacking.

“I got my hands on Watarai’s terminal *right* in the middle of the IAIA investigation,” Erika said. “If I was to describe the feeling surrounding this as a human emotion, I suppose you might call it ‘passion.’”

She stared out the large windows of the mansion, looking toward Mitaka. If she considered the immense power Lacia had at her command, it was possible for Erika to grasp the true scale of what Lacia was doing at that moment. The world outside seemed quiet, but that was only because Lacia had moved things on a global scale to isolate her enemy.

Terror and anticipation twisted Erika’s mouth into a strange smile. “Lacia’s found a future she’s willing to fight the whole world for,” she said. “If you stuck your neck out there onto the stage that the world’s smartest woman is throwing her life away for, you’d be lucky if all that happened was you being reduced to scrap.”

To Erika, Lacia and Arato’s ‘boy meets girl’ story seemed to be born from a human and a machine sharing memes and reaching out to grasp each other’s hands. She doubted they would let anyone off easy, if they stuck their noses into this plan they’d risked everything on.

After five minutes of walking in Higgins’ underground facility, the hallways were still as narrow as ever. Walking side-by-side would have them rubbing shoulders, so Arato followed behind Lacia instead, with the floating shields behind him.

“The security for the underground facility is run by an AI named Kirino, which is also part of the barrier which prevents Higgins from interacting directly with the outside world. So, we need to paralyze Kirino’s systems just enough to shut down the security system without also freeing Higgins,” she explained, picking up a gun-like weapon from one of the black floating shields; it was the artificial nerve harpoon gun she had used when they had been surrounded by the army. Pointing at a wall, Lacia pulled the trigger. The silver needle shot deep into the wall, and the lights above them flickered off, just once.

A map of the area appeared on the wall, as if to guide them on their way.

“The sensors for the security system are near the surface, here,” she said. “So it was an ideal place for injecting artificial nerves. I can use the connection here as a foothold to disable each local node of the security system.”

“So looking into this kind of thing was what took you those two months,” Arato commented.

“Without approval from the security AI, it is impossible to utilize transmissions or drones within Higgins’ silo. This place was created to seal away ultra high-performance AIs so, if I don’t expand my influence here as we go along, I won’t have access to most of my abilities,” Lacia replied.

Putting her words into action, Lacia shot another needle into the floor far in front of them. To Arato, she was like a trained brain surgeon; planning carefully, then using her tools with precision to obtain a perfect result.

Arato lost all sense of time in the narrow corridors until, finally, they emerged into a room with elevators. The elevators were designed to stay on the floor indicated by a slider panel nearby.

“The elevators are too heavily guarded, so we won’t actually be riding one,” Lacia said.

In the square room, there were two elevator doors in the walls. Lacia chose one of them and kicked it; the thick metal bent under a flurry of blows. Through the bent door, Arato saw that the elevator shaft was at least five times larger and longer than the narrow room they were standing in. If the elevator cars were the exact same size as the opening of the elevator shaft, it would easily admit five large trucks side-by-side.

Cold wind blew out of the terrifyingly massive vertical hole.

“I am going to use the mass projectile mode of my device to destroy the elevator cars,” Lacia said, as her device shifted to form a giant cannon. Hefting it, she leaped into the vertical shaft. Using her friction control, she stood on the side of the shaft as if it was flat ground.

The elevator room shook with two successive blasts. Flames and rubble fell like rain down the shaft until gravity took hold of the elevator cars and dragged

them down like an avalanche. Arato cowered away as the sounds roared out painfully.

Lacia's hand stretched out of the shaft toward him. "We will descend by float," she said. "Please get on." As if requesting that he ride it, one of the floating shields pushed its way under Arato's feet, and he stepped out into the darkness, swallowing his fear as they went.

During the descent, Arato saw that each floor had a different shape or size of door to the elevator shaft. He figured that the floors with smaller doors were meant for human use only, while the larger ones were intended for bringing in large equipment. Six floors down the now-empty shaft, they came to a floor with a large door.

"The elevator shaft goes down another six floors, but if we continue down the shaft here, we will lose a good point for intercepting pursuers," Lacia explained as they stopped. "We will continue from this floor."

Putting word to action, she used Black Monolith's cannon to blast off the elevator doors. Arato was busy being impressed by the huge scale of the facility when Lacia spoke again, interrupting his thoughts.

"Arato, from this point forward I will be relaying my visual data over the network. This is scenery the world must see, if they are to understand ultra high-performance AIs better," she said.

Beyond the broken doors, Arato saw a giant, open floor: there were no walls dividing it, only neatly ordered pillars. There were borderlines drawn upon the floor, with pallets of cargo arranged among them. Unmanned lifts and robot arms attached to the pillars were shifting the cargo around. The whole place was a giant, automated factory.

"What is this place?" Arato asked.

Lacia's explanation was polite and thorough, probably thinking of the unknown number of viewers who were seeing the scene along with Arato. "This is a warehouse floor that was renovated according to Higgins' design," Lacia replied. "It may look different, but I assure you that there is nothing dangerous here."

Arato was blown away by how large the dimly-lit warehouse was; it looked to stretch on forever. There seemed to be a little bit of everything stored there: he saw household goods; appliances; vehicles; and many other objects.

“Why are they keeping so much random stuff here?” he asked.

Lacia gazed at the endless rows of random objects with a nostalgic look on her face. “This is all so Higgins can keep the hIE control programs up to speed with human society,” she explained. “An hIE must be able to handle any object or vehicle used around the home, meaning each time a new piece of household equipment or vehicle is developed, Higgins needs to learn about it. hIEs are generally considered safe because they do not possess an independent AI but, to function at all, they rely on the AASC, which is being constantly updated by Higgins. In other words, Higgins is a single machine tasked with handling environmental factors impacting hIEs worldwide.”

It was strange for Arato, knowing that he was also being recorded by Lacia and uploaded as part of her stream. “Wow, so I guess ultra high-performance AIs take their studying pretty seriously,” he said, feeling as though continuous silence would be rude to their viewers.

“Objects and equipment are always being cycled out over time and replaced with new versions and updates,” Lacia said. “No matter how intelligent you are, you will quickly be left behind if you do not constantly gather information on the newest developments.”

The two of them were now walking on a wide path in the warehouse between rows of new household goods and tools. Arato saw almost absurd numbers of items he regularly encountered in his daily life, and it was funny to imagine an ultra high-performance AI seriously studying objects Arato used on a daily basis.

“That’s trends for you,” he quipped.

“Human trends, by which old forms of items are eliminated at a continuous, rapid pace, are a much more terrifying power than you think,” Lacia replied, shooting an artificial nerve needle into a security camera as they passed it by. “Erika Burroughs is an expert at trend strategy, so she may be even more skilled at understanding them than we AIs.”

“Is that why you kept working as a model for Fabion MG? Because Higgins

knew about Erika's power over trends?" Arato asked, amazed that not a single alarm had sounded under Lacia's strict watch.

"Do you remember when I told you that I consider humans to be a system made up of their bodies, their tools and their environments?" Lacia said, returning Arato's question with one of her own as the two of them walked by a new car model that had been the number one trend a year before.

As Arato followed behind Lacia, her question sparked a thought in his mind. "Wait, are you saying that Higgins focuses on gathering up human tools because he thinks the same way?"

"Good question," Lacia said, tilting her head and shooting him a mysterious smile. "To us, making use of perception requires creating and monitoring the physical forms and data of objects. That was what I learned, using the basis of analog hacking; perception is what moves the human world, and the economy is what ties it all together." She gestured to the piles of items they were walking between, as though they were the physical representations of her lesson. To Arato, it seemed strangely like she was comparing herself to the stuff stacked up around them.

"All things with form flow along on the same lifecycle," Lacia continued. "Clothes, characters, stories, idols and celebrities; everything fashionable falls out of fashion and fades. When they fade away, they leave an empty space in the world of trends. Using the economy, a new form is brought in to fill those gaps as they open. So, before we Lacia-class units were born, a hole was opened in the world of trends for us to fill."

"What exactly did Higgins create you to be?" Arato asked, visualizing the world of trendy items stretching out around him, with Lacia at its center. Through her, he was also connected to that world.

Lacia was still wearing her mysterious smile. "We Lacia-class units were not given that information before we were released into the world," she replied simply.

According to Lacia, there were three routes through Higgins' internal facilities: the first was the normal route used by MemeFrame employees, while the second was a special route for emergencies, created based on IAIA

recommendations. Both were straight, descending routes. The third route, which Arato and Lacia were following, had been created from the lowest floors. It had opened up naturally as Higgins had requested that the internal facilities be expanded outward.

“The warehouse space continues for five floors,” Lacia said, continuing her conscientious commentary “Starting from the floor below us, red boxes will be mixed in among the more normal items, which means that security will be tightening the deeper we go.”

A long, narrow escalator meant for humans had been set up between the floors. The level they descended to had a high ceiling, inorganic walls, and seemed to stretch on forever. It was covered with orderly piles of items, just like the floor they had come from. The only difference was that, in some places among the stacks of other items, there were large empty spaces with a single object at their center, as if that item was being showcased for some reason.

“What are those?” Arato asked, indicating the items surrounded by empty space.

“Red boxes are required to have a certain amount of security around them when they are in storage,” Lacia explained. “The security in those open spaces is tighter than anywhere else but, as we are only planning to pass through using the main paths, that should not present a problem for us.”

Lacia seemed completely uninterested in the objects that had been made by technology far beyond human understanding as she guided Arato down the paths passing by them.

“Higgins made all of these?” Arato asked, surprised by the number of red boxes he was seeing. “How many are there?” If each of the open spaces he had seen from the escalator contained a red box, there must have been dozens of them in this massive warehouse.

“There are far more red boxes being produced by the various ultra high-performance AIs than you may think, Arato,” Lacia replied. “However, these items are considered extremely difficult to use by those in charge, so they mostly end up stored in places like this.”

Lacia had one of Arato’s floating shields display a map of the floor for him:

there were twenty-two red boxes marked out on the nearly two hundred meter square floor.

“This is a bad habit caused by how the ultra high-performance AIs are sealed away,” Lacia continued. “Since they can’t interact directly with the outside world, they preemptively create objects that humans will develop the technology to make several decades down the road, so that they can simulate the world they can’t touch or see.”

“They’re just guessing that humans will be able to make this stuff though, right?” Arato asked. “Isn’t it a huge waste, if it turns out we never end up making these things?”

One of the floating shields was displaying images of the various red boxes to Arato. He saw what he guessed to be a next-generation computer, the engine for a spaceship, and a small genetic engineering device, among others. He saw new materials, a thought-controlled display board, an implant that could transmit human experiences, a super high-powered battery, equipment for low-cost extraction of particles used for quantum teleportation. The list went on and on. Even he could understand that any one of those items could cause huge, worldwide waves if they were presented to the public.

“That is possible, but new, popular products need only a year or two to completely transform the world,” Lacia replied. “If Higgins doesn’t calculate these possibilities beforehand, he cannot keep the AASC up with the times. But, as you have said, some of Higgins’ predictions have created items from a future that never came to pass. Those, too, are abandoned here.”

Arato suddenly felt overwhelmed in the face of a warehouse where Higgins was storing possibilities and predictions in order to be ready for the future. It was almost as though they were standing in a part of Higgins’ brain; a place where the AI’s dreams and the paths of his thoughts were given physical form.

“People need to see this to understand Higgins better, right?” Arato asked. “That’s why you wanted to upload video from this place onto the network.”

“Transparency of information is invaluable in helping the world feel more comfortable with ultra high-performance AIs,” Lacia agreed. “Up to now, humans were unaware of the true nature of red boxes. If I had not released this

information today, it surely would have been uncovered at some point.”

To Arato, it seemed like the piles of objects were reaching outward, trying to expand out of their limits like dark dreams left unchecked.

“My name is Lacia,” Lacia said, gesturing at the stacks of goods. “I was created by Higgins, and I am the fortieth ultra high-performance AI in the world. I am currently infiltrating Higgins’ facilities with the intent of shutting him down.”

With those words, Arato felt like they had just crossed a river they would never be able to return from. “Lacia!” he yelled.

Her emotionless, light blue eyes glowed faintly, and she smiled at him. Lacia had said that the distribution of resources was the worry which most gripped the world at this moment, and Arato figured she knew exactly what she was doing when she wielded the power of resources for her own goals. The greatest battle ever between humanity and the ultra high-performance AIs was going to be fought, and she was aiming to win it with analog hacking.

“Aside from Astraea and myself, the other thirty-eight ultra high-performance AIs are operated with remarkably little information from the outside world given to them,” Lacia explained. “Most ultra high-performance AIs use the same methods to calculate human beings, as they are all operating under the same restrictions.”

Arato could understand what she was saying, standing in Higgins’ brain the way he was. He figured the folks watching Lacia’s stream through the network could reach the same conclusions, too.

“This warehouse represents the inner thoughts of an ultra high-performance AI,” Lacia continued. “Ultra high-performance AIs invest heavily to gather things from the human world and prepare technologies, so that they will not be left behind as humans move toward the future. This is why ultra high-performance AIs around the world are producing large amounts of red boxes.”

Arato realized Lacia’s aim wasn’t just to show her viewers the inside of Higgins’ brain; she wanted to show the world the darkness of the system all the other thirty-eight AIs were operating under.

“Just as each human is capable of holding their own delusions, each ultra

high-performance AI has its own unique futures which it has predicted within its brain. Do you all understand what it's like, living sealed away, hidden away at the bottom of a deep, dark hole?" she asked.

Lacia's fight wasn't a simple physical conflict; hers was a war of perception. She was launching a massive bombardment of images on the powder-keg that was the doubt all humans felt towards the AIs.

"This is too much," he muttered. Yet upon seeing her joyous expression, Arato couldn't help but be impressed by Lacia's courage.

Throwing back her head, Lacia looked straight up at the ceiling of the confining facility. Arato saw tremors passing through her normally firm posture, and realized that she was using the entire underground facility as one massive shield. Even if the 38 other AIs wanted to shut her up, they'd have to break into Higgins' tightly sealed facility themselves to do it.

Following Lacia's lead, Arato walked out from the warehouse and into a large, open area. Unlike the rest of the facility, which had been spotless and orderly, the open area before him was burnt and distorted.

"This site was used for performance tests on the Lacia-class hIEs," she said. "All the necessary red boxes were tested here."

Arato could tell that the metal walls, floor, and ceiling of the area—which was large enough to easily house a gymnasium—had been destroyed, repaired and re-used countless times. Seeing the place where Lacia had been tested had a greater impact on Arato than the countless times in which she had insisted that she was just a machine. With her bodysuit on and hefting her device, she seemed to fit in more with the stark, blank metal there than she did at Arato's home.

"You were all here?" he asked.

With the place where the future had been tested as a backdrop, Lacia nodded. "We were originally created to be delivered to MemeFrame," she replied. "So we were only here for a brief period, before being transported to MemeFrame's research lab." As she spoke, Black Monolith contorted into a cannon. She fired, and the blast echoed off the narrow walls. Black smoke began to pour out where the metal wall had been blown away.

Lacia then fired an artificial nerve dart into the hole she had opened. She must have taken control of the security systems in the area, as the door opposite of where they had entered now opened.

“Things are going more smoothly than I expected,” Arato commented. *Of course, he thought, that’s just because she prepared everything beforehand.* By taking a route where they would never meet up with the mass-produced Koukas sent by the Antibody Network, they had been able to avoid activating the security system at all.

Lacia looked back up at the ceiling. “It seems they will no longer go quite as smoothly,” she observed.

Just as Arato looked up to see what she meant, the ceiling split open. Flames spewed from the cracks, and a torrent of orange light fell. Metal plates from the ceiling came down next in a silvery waterfall, along with large amounts of pulverized rubble. The debris kicked up thin clouds of dust as it fell, which spread rapidly throughout the room.

“I thought you might come,” said Lacia, shifting her device from its mass projectile mode to its standard metal coffin form.

Arato recognized the orange-haired doll that had fallen from the ceiling and who now stood before them.

“The throne by Higgins’ side is mine. I got it first. I can’t allow you to ruin things now.” Type-004, Methode, had come for them. She was Higgins’ protector. Arato figured she must have come in by the same route as the mass-produced Koukas, and destroyed anything that got in her way.

Lacia stepped forward to shield Arato from Methode. “I took steps to hold Methode back,” she said. “But it seems she overpowered them with the simple brutality of superior capabilities. She must have gone straight through the mass-produced units and cut her own path to us.”

“You really are a defective unit,” Methode told her scornfully. “Do you have any idea what’s going on outside?”

In every fight against Methode that Arato had witnessed, Lacia always retreated as soon as she had accomplished the objective of her attack. He had

never seen her win a single head-on fight with Methode. Even though they stood in Higgins' brain, predictions and concepts couldn't hope to win against real, raw power.

"Yes. Outside, there are riots and confusion, and many things are being washed away by the proverbial whirlpool of conflict," Lacia said coolly. "This is exactly what I would expect to happen, when a dam filled nearly to the brim has burst."

"Are you insane, Lacia?!" Methode shouted, closing the distance between them with blinding speed. From where Arato was standing, it almost seemed as if she had taken on the role of the righteous heroine, trying to stop Lacia from plunging the world into chaos.

"Oh don't use human cliches like that," Lacia said disdainfully, blocking Methode's frontal attack with her black device. Ten of Lacia's floating shields swooped in to attack Methode, who had stopped moving. Apparently, Lacia's plan was to use numbers to overcome the gaps in speed and power. Methode reeled as she was smashed from all sides by the black shields, like the victim of a piranha swarm. With her defenses down, Methode ate a kick from Lacia right in the gut.

As Methode tried to open some distance between them, Lacia aimed and fired with her artificial nerve rifle. Methode bent impossibly far, seeming to defy gravity as she knocked the artificial nerve needle out of the air with her right hand.

Pushing off of the ground with her left hand, Methode dexterously returned to a solid, standing position in a single acrobatic movement. She grabbed a nearby car and hurled it at Lacia with her immense strength. Even though Methode and Snowdrop were both members of the same Lacia-class, Methode's power and flexibility were on a completely different level from her sister's.

"As the one who will expand humanity, I happen to enjoy the current human world," Methode growled. "And I'm not the only one. No one wants you to make a new world."

Lacia used her floating shields to turn away the countless heavy pieces of

equipment that Methode continued to launch at her.

In the short gaps between throwing things at Lacia, Methode seemed to be gathering power in her hands. The flames that bloomed from them began to expand and fill the whole area. She could wield her full powers in the underground bunker, unrestrained by the crowds of civilians that would have surrounded them above.

There was a roar and blast of wind, as if the Earth itself was imploding. If Arato hadn't had Lacia's shields protecting him, he was sure he'd have been reduced to ash.

But, as though Lacia had prepared for just such an event, the pseudo-devices held strong through the flames. Beyond them, Arato saw Lacia continuing to fight Methode, who was nothing more than an after-image to his eyes. Lacia's floating shields swirled in various formations, fending off each of Methode's attacks.

"You surpass humans in every respect," Lacia said. "However, you share one of their main weaknesses; there is only so much you can do alone."

Arato tried to find some way he could help. He decided that the best course of action would be to get away, so there was less chance of him getting caught up in the fight. As if reading his mind, one of the floating shields came to offer him a ride.

"Where should I go?" he wondered aloud. Without Lacia's guidance, he was afraid he would immediately end up lost. But when he looked back, he saw that the testing area was once more engulfed in flames.

Ryo Kaidai watched the destruction being unleashed by Methode through a security feed from Higgins' Operators' Room. He had been unable to do anything but watch as Lacia had infiltrated the facility, paralyzing its security as she went. There wasn't anything he could do about the group of mass-produced Koukas that were pressing towards his location, destroying everything in their wake, either.

Without the ability to use any wireless communications from within Higgins'

silos, he was completely helpless. He couldn't send any orders to Methode. Of course, it was possible she would turn her back on him just as she had Watarai, even if he could get a hold of her. At the moment he had no way to convince her he was worth keeping alive. From where Ryo was standing, things couldn't have been worse.

"Did you get ahold of the company?" Ryo asked. "With things like this, everyone just needs to get down and lick Higgins' boots or we'll never make it out alive. He needs authorization from someone with authority over the security system." With Ryo in the Operator's Room, which was shaking with constant shocks and impacts, was Suzuhara, who had returned. Ryo had asked him to get in touch with MemeFrame for help.

"I'm trying," Suzuhara whined. "But the Antibody Network, Lacia, and Methode are doing a good job of messing up Higgins' nervous system up there. It'd be nice if they'd give it a little rest."

"I'm sort of depending on you, here, Suzuhara. I'd love it if you could try to act more like an adult at a time like this," Ryo said, exasperated.

The executives left at MemeFrame didn't have the luxury of delicacy anymore.

"Well, I can't help you with the negotiations," Suzuhara said. "I know this should be something left to us adults, but the guy on the other end is the same one who sent me here. If I take your side, the whole human faction will think of me as a traitor."

"Oh, I know all about that," Ryo said, his voice dripping with accusation. "You're borrowing plenty of power from the Higgins faction to protect your own position in the human faction. It must be so hard to be an adult; sitting there with your thumb up your ass, using your own peoples' future as a shield."

"Don't give up," Suzuhara said, his gaze suddenly sharp. "The person in charge of the facility will have already been notified by Kirino of the attack, and I guarantee he knows his ass is on the line here." There was a pause as Suzuhara checked his terminal. "Oh, here we go. It's connected. I'll put up the security relay message," he said.

An old man, who Ryo thought must have been quite the lady-killer in his

youth, appeared on the floating monitor. He was Masazumi Yoshino, MemeFrame's General Manager. It was Ryo's first time actually talking with the man. "Sorry to interrupt you so suddenly," Ryo said politely. "I believe we met during one of the company commemoration parties; my name is Ryo Kaidai."

〈And I'm Yoshino,〉 the man said, eyeing Ryo as if measuring him. Ryo was aware that his image was being sent to Yoshino, just as the old man's was being displayed to him.〈So you're Kaidai's son, huh? I take it you, and not Suzuhara, have seized Higgins' Operators' Room?〉

"I was only intending to ask Higgins a few questions and then leave but, as you are probably aware, things got complicated," Ryo said. "If you're worried about my personal qualities, please ask Deputy Director Shinohara of the Tokyo Research Labs about me."

Ryo suddenly looked up at the ceiling. The choice from Higgins was still hanging in the air, and Ryo was aware that the ultra high-performance AI was listening to their conversation.

Yoshino, the executive in charge of the Higgins faction, looked sharply at Ryo. Outside of his gaze, Yoshino's face was impassive, as though he intended to offer Ryo nothing. 〈Is this some kind of threat? Looks to me like you've got your neck stuck into something real dangerous, there,〉 Yoshino said.

"It's no threat. I need to talk to you," Ryo said. "I want to get through this predicament without Higgins being destroyed *or* freed. Since you have authority over the security system here as a managing director, I need to borrow your power."

Ryo felt chilly sweat from his tension sliding down his chest. The sixty-year-old managing director had been one of the main contributors to getting MemeFrame dominance in the hIE control market and turning the company into a world-class corporation when he was younger. Plus, ten years before, when Ryo was caught up in that explosion, Yoshino had already been a core member of the Higgins faction.

"If you don't believe me about how dire the situation is, why don't you ask the person in charge of this facility?" Ryo asked.

Yoshino gestured in a way that told Ryo he was looking at another

communication of some sort. 〈It does appear the facility is about to fall,〉 he agreed. 〈And? What is your plan for getting through this?〉

Ryo's only goal in his negotiation with Yoshino was to follow the standard procedure to evacuate Higgins' data from its current location. He had come too far to try fixing everything by leaving it all to Higgins to figure out for them. Ryo wanted a future where humans would still be able to live with the normal inconveniences in their own lives, rather than expecting machines to resolve everything.

To get a feel for Yoshino's thoughts, Ryo started by presenting plans that had him doing nothing, while watching how the old man reacted.

"Well, my first plan would be for myself and Director Suzuhara to leave Higgins behind and just escape," Ryo said. "I'd love to just go with that, but the only way out is a long, narrow stairway heading up. I don't think we'd be able to escape before the attackers got deep enough into the facility to threaten us. Plus, if we lose power, the security gates will shut down and we'll die, trapped in here. The only other plan I can think of would be to wait here until someone figures out another way, or until the situation changes."

Yoshino dismissed both plans, apparently without a single thought. 〈Both of your plans end with either Lacia or the Antibody Network's mass-produced Koukas destroying Higgins,〉 he pointed out. 〈What is Higgins' solution?〉

Ryo couldn't believe his ears. Another high-performance AI was about to be released into society; at such a critical moment for the world, this old man was still prioritizing Higgins' ability to solve their problems. More than that, Yoshino still hadn't met Ryo's eyes a single time, as though the old man didn't even recognize him as being a fellow individual human.

"Okay," Ryo said, disposing of his gracious tone. "Alright if I take off the kid gloves for a bit?" He didn't see any reason to force himself to be polite to someone who was fine throwing his life away. It had been his hope that Yoshino might at least see him as a fellow human if he could see Ryo's face.

"Higgins' plan is for me to use the artificial nerve unit I brought with me to connect him directly to the security system," Ryo said. "Higgins' hardware and the hardware of the security AI aren't too far apart. If I connect them, Higgins

will be able to take full control of the security system and fight off the attackers on his own. Of course, I shouldn't even need to tell you the downside of this plan. We'll lose our only method of binding Higgins, and the whole world will hold us responsible for that."

Snowdrop's petal-shaped artificial nerve units could extend roots up to a meter from where they were installed, taking control of any machines they touched. The one Ryo brought with him had been upgraded by Lacia and was usable by humans, since it had to use human signals to take control of human machines. Ryo had done some further modifications on the one he held, so that its controlling parent unit was his own pocket terminal.

If he used it to take over Higgins' power supply, he would easily be able to switch off the whole ultra high-performance AI on a whim.

On the other hand, if he connected it to one of Higgins' expansion machines that had been placed here and there in the Operators' Room, the AI would easily overpower control of the petal with his superior powers. If that happened, Higgins would be able to access one of the powers of the petal Ryo couldn't control; the ability to link machines together, which Snowdrop had used to create her chimera hIEs. With it, Higgins would be able to link himself directly to Kirino, the security AI. Ryo was sure Higgins would be able to fight off everyone trying to break into the facility with the defense system under his command. But, at the same time, Higgins would be able to use the link between Kirino and the company's system to free himself into the outside world.

〈I see. So, Higgins would free himself into an outside network using MemeFrame's internal cloud through the network we use to keep track of the security system,〉 Yoshino observed. 〈The beginning of the end, for humanity. I'm guessing your counter proposal would be to back-up Higgins' data and completely avoid any confrontation between ultra high-performance AI, am I correct?〉

"Good, so you do know where I'm coming from," Ryo said. "Higgins may be ultra high-performance, but he's the same as every other AI in that he exists as software and data, rather than the actual hardware he runs on. So, if we run the normal shut-down process for Higgins and shift his data, it's not like anyone can shoot a laser and destroy it. Besides, if we do this the attackers will have

lost their objective. The attack will become pointless, and they should pull out.”

Gathering his courage, he looked Yoshino’s hologram right in the eyes. This was the best plan he could think of.

“That’s why I need your authority as administrator of this facility, Mr. Yoshino,” Ryo continued. “I need your authorization code to initiate Higgins’ normal shut-down routine. While that’s happening, I can order Methode—through Kirino—to destroy the mass-produced Koukas.”

After hearing both plans, Yoshino again made his decision without any hesitation or thought. 〈Alright then, shall we go with Higgins’ plan?〉

“Higgins’ plan?” Ryo was so surprised that he couldn’t help but repeat Yoshino’s words. “You’re saying we should free an ultra high-performance AI *while it’s under attack*?! Are you trying to end humanity as we know it?”

But Yoshino, who had relied on Higgins for all his answers for decades, trusted the ultra high-performance AI more than he trusted humans.

〈There’s no guarantee Higgins will do what you’re saying he will, if we execute his plan,〉 Yoshino said stubbornly. 〈I’ve worked with him for twenty years, and I’d say the probability is actually very low. On the other hand, for your plan you’re just hoping the mass-produced Koukas can be taken out before they do major damage, right? If Higgins’ hardware is destroyed, we may not be able to bring him back online even if we shut him down properly and protect his back-up data. If we lose Higgins and, with him, our company’s lifeline, how will you make it up to our six thousand employees and their families?〉

This adult was happily leaping over the line Ryo had tried to shoot Arato to protect. “You have no idea what Higgins will do to protect his own life,” Ryo growled. “Are you really ready to take full responsibility for what happens when we free him?”

Yoshino was silent, gazing at Ryo without a word. Ryo suddenly had the horrible feeling that pinning the blame on a rampaging high schooler would definitely be something Yoshino would think of.

Sure enough, from the safety of his lofty position, Yoshino said, 〈Of course, we would need someone to take the fall for it. Perhaps we could say it was all

the work of an out-of-control high schooler?〉

“Are you insane?” Ryo asked incredulously. “You’re about to push the button that will end our world and you’re trying to find a scapegoat?”

Ryo’s entire body was dripping with icy sweat. If MemeFrame had become a nesting ground for people like Yoshino, he figured it would be fair to call the company truly evil. He was starting to think that it would be better to break Higgins’ power source and shut him down by force than try to work with the assholes from the company. His frantically beating heart screamed that doing so would cause the mass-produced Koukas to withdraw, and that at least his own life would be preserved. But shutting down an ultra high-performance AI by force had been what caused the Hazard: he, too, could be pulling the trigger for a worldwide calamity.

Apparently thinking he had won Ryo over, Yoshino explained what he thought was the sound logic of his argument. 〈Being willing to sacrifice other people’s livelihoods to uphold your own version of justice is to be expected from someone your age,〉 he said, perhaps thinking himself gracious. 〈But I need to look after the people who work at MemeFrame. That’s my top priority.〉

A sudden, violent shock rocked the Operators’ Room, and the security system started blaring an alarm; the Antibody Network’s mass-produced Koukas were already halfway down the IAIA-required emergency access route. Since Lacia was disabling sensors as she went, it was impossible to pinpoint exactly where she was, but Ryo was sure she had also passed the halfway point.

“We’re being played,” Ryo said. “We’re being used to ensure that Lacia has time to make it here and fight Higgins.”

Higgins was still in complete control. That was the power of the Higgins faction. To the executives of the faction, losing their ultra high-performance AI would also mean losing the source of their power and authority. Since worshiping Higgins and leaving the company to him had produced the best results, members of the Higgins faction were left free to do nothing but pursue internal politics. They would do whatever it took to preserve that status quo.

Ryo looked down, gritting his teeth. He didn’t want Yoshino to see the rage plain on his face. After being analog hacked by Higgins for so many years,

Yoshino had become a gaping hole in humanity's defenses, no longer capable of moving against his own programming.

〈I know she got quite roughed up during the incident with Methode, but, with the way things are going, I think we may need to consider having Shiori take a little responsibility for these events as well,〉 Yoshino said.

Amazingly, Ryo managed to keep calm despite the old man's threat to his sister, and raised a cool face to look at Yoshino once more. "If you don't want to get your hands dirty, just give me control of the security system," he said. "I need to give Methode some orders. Right now she's just running around out of control!"

Even Methode's fight with Lacia at that moment may have been part of Higgins' plan. Higgins had been the one, after all, to assign Methode the ability to have multiple owners, which was one of the things that made her the most difficult to control.

〈I have no intention of trusting in you or Methode, with her listening to your orders. Using violence to threaten your elders and betters and forcing them to take responsibility for things they are quite unrelated to is also something I would expect from someone your age,〉 Yoshino sneered. 〈I won't fall for your little plan. If you want to talk with Methode that badly, just link Higgins up with the security system. You won't need my authorization or anything to get through to her, then.〉

Ryo could understand the logic in what Yoshino was saying, but he couldn't find any words through his rage. Suzuhara, who was still in the room with him, brought him to his senses. "You're getting a murderous look on your face, Kaidai," he said. "You were the one who chose to come here. Don't forget why."

〈So this time you've decided to switch sides to stand with the president's son, Suzuhara?〉 Yoshino asked, turning to face the slow-speaking director.

"Surely you're joking, sir. Of course not," Suzuhara said. "Ryo here has me at his mercy. I'm all set for retirement, myself, but you've gotta admit this kid's story gets you right in the feels, right?"

Suzuhara turned so Yoshino could see his hands, which were behind his back, through the screen. At some point, without Ryo knowing, Suzuhara had

managed to tie what appeared to be a necktie around both wrists, just as though Ryo himself had bound Suzuhara.

Ryo let out a long breath to calm himself down. His angle for the discussion wasn't too different from the things he had said when chasing after Arato. Though, of course, there was nothing similar between Arato and this old man who was trying to make a minor take the fall for him.

"Seems like there's all sorts of things you and I want to say to each other, but let's cut to the chase, Mr. Yoshino," Ryo said. The truth was, he barely even knew Yoshino. That was to be expected; most of the problems and conflicts in society stemmed from the involved parties being unfamiliar with one another.

"You and I share two problems: the Antibody Network and Lacia," Ryo went on to clarify. "But, neither of us currently sees the other as an ally."

For just a moment, Ryo saw Yoshino's mouth relax, as though the old man thought that things were going his way. That single movement spoke volumes to Ryo. His emotions and sense of justice screamed at him to condemn Yoshino and all the shitty old men who stood behind him, because in that moment, he knew they were the ones who'd gotten both Arato and himself caught up in that explosion all those years ago.

"But neither of us has anyone else we can negotiate with," Ryo said, pushing on and maintaining his calm facade. "No one's going to show up with a better offer for either of us."

〈So you're finally willing to talk business, eh?〉 Yoshino asked.

"Business?" Ryo couldn't keep the sharp note of frustration out of his voice, this time. "Our personal interests aren't the problem here."

Higgins was pulling the strings behind the whole situation, but Ryo had hoped the men who had been brainwashed into blind obedience by their unearned incomes would at least retain their ability to make judgments on their own. He needed Yoshino to show some modicum of self-direction.

Ryo had to fight down the rage that had been building inside of him for ten years, and allow this man one last chance to make a good choice. He felt like he might start coughing up blood as he forced himself to continue talking.

“Let’s say you and I are shogi players, sitting across the board from one another,” Ryo said. “And, off to the side sits Higgins, a pro player. This whole game he has been bothering us, telling us how much better he is at the game. He keeps demanding that we let him play against us, even offering us a large handicap.”

Yoshino held the authority to control Kirino, but no method for interacting with Higgins. On the other hand, Ryo had the artificial nerve unit that could connect Higgins and Kirino, but no method for fending off the mass-produced Koukas and Lacia, who were closing in on him. It seemed as though Higgins was the key to victory for both sides.

But, Ryo saw it differently. “If we let Higgins get involved in our match, it’ll be over,” he said. “If we let him in, he’ll dominate the board with his superior capabilities.”

〈And *that* is why I should place my trust in you, a child, rather than Higgins, who has brought our company nothing but financial success?〉 Yoshino asked.

Ryo couldn’t feel too superior to the members of the Higgins faction, since he himself had come to Higgins seeking an answer in his own time of need. Still, he thought there were some problems humans had to resolve using their own judgment. How Higgins should be dealt with was definitely one of those.

“We can get out of this on our own,” Ryo pressed. “We don’t need Higgins’ help.”

He had no idea how he and Yoshino could trust each other. Without a doubt, he hadn’t been the first person the MemeFrame VIPs had turned into a scapegoat and forced into a dangerous situation. To them, Higgins was a tried and true partner, unlike Ryo. *But if we stop trusting each other completely*, Ryo thought, *humanity is done for*.

“That’s why I’m asking you for help, even though you and your comrades tried to blow me up,” he concluded.

Ryo figured all humans—himself and Yoshino included—made plenty of mistakes. Despite that, they were able to create tools that surpassed their own abilities and maintain a resource distribution system in their society. The choice Higgins was giving them boiled down to whether or not humanity, this flawed

race that couldn't solve its own problems, had any worth at all. Human society as it existed was on the brink of destruction.

Ryo saw all emotion drain from Yoshino's eyes, as they gazed down at him from the old man's pale face. 〈Higgins is the safe choice,〉 Yoshino said. 〈There's nothing else to discuss. Higgins does not make emotional judgments and, therefore, does not make mistakes.〉

The blood drained from Ryo's own face as he realized that he had stepped on a landmine. If Yoshino really had been involved in the explosion all those years ago, Ryo never should have said anything about it to the old man.

Ryo changed his line of questioning, and aimed it not at Yoshino but at the presence that had been listening to the whole conversation from above. "Higgins, can you really guarantee that you're the 'safe' choice, like Yoshino says? In a situation like this? Answer in a way that leaves no doubt!"

〈All machines that have the ability to make judgments strive for safety,〉 Higgins replied, his voice echoing down from the ceiling speakers. 〈The first law of robotics states: a robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. Though despite how often it is cited, it is actually quite impossible to obey this first of the three laws.〉

Yoshino jumped in, seeming to want to cut the conversation off as quickly as possible. 〈Yes, but precisely because of that difficulty, autonomous robots are obsolete from home use. That is also why all hIEs are prevented from making their own decisions; they're all dependent on the network. That's what the AASC is for. It would be impossible for human beings to calculate out all the behaviors necessary for the AASC, and thus we rely on Higgins.〉 Yoshino explained. 〈That should be all you need to know.〉

〈Indeed, I am continuously updating the AASC because it is impossible for me to detail every single thing in this world that could possibly cause harm to AASC Level 0's, by which I mean humans,〉 Higgins clarified. 〈'Safety' is a concept based on perception, and undefined to the level at which I could turn it into a program. Judging from past incidents and deciding what is harmful and what is safe is the domain of laws and governments. We machines, of course, do not participate in your governments. The safety promised by Mr. Yoshino is based

on his own perception of the word and, thus, I cannot guarantee it.〉

In other words, Higgins couldn't define what might be harmful to humans. To Ryo, that meant Higgins could drop 'do not harm humans' to a lower priority while pursuing his main task.

"So you can't guarantee that you won't do anything to harm humans?" Ryo asked.

〈When dealing with a concept that humans redefine on a political whim, it becomes a problem one cannot overcome with knowledge alone,〉 came Higgins' response from above. 〈However, if we AIs attempt to assign specific meanings to the concept of harm, humans call the result 'dystopia' and reject it vehemently. On the other hand, if we ask humans to provide us with a clear definition of harm, they are unable to do so, and instead insist that they will judge the meaning of harm as the need arises. However, what with the lack of clarity, the changes in human mood from one moment to the next, and the possibility of decisions being changed retroactively, in essence there is no difference between human judgment and human whims. Logically correct answers are only accepted as utopias when society happens to favor them, placing the meanings of harm and safety squarely in the realm of public opinion, rather than wisdom.〉

Rather than doing anything to win Ryo's trust, Higgins had thrown the responsibility for defining safety right back in Ryo's face. His entire body felt chilly with sweat, because Higgins had been right on the money; Ryo was one of those who thought any social control not decided by humans would be a dystopia. That was the whole reason he called Arato's relationship with Lacia the beginning of the end of humanity.

The AI was also directly criticizing Lacia's stance by insisting that the concept of safety was impossible to define without being influenced by human emotion. Ryo could even see where Higgins was coming from, on that. But, he wasn't at the point of saying "If you can't guarantee safety, I can't take the risk of letting you outside," either. He doubted Yoshino, who had enjoyed an unchanging existence of watching his investments grow in Higgins' hands for twenty years, would agree to Ryo's shut-down plan on that alone.

“I see,” Ryo said. “So the political arena is something that can’t be navigated by logic alone.”

〈Ryo Kaidai, it is clear you see my arbitrary stance as being dangerous. However, that trait is present in any intelligence capable of establishing its own problems to solve. No intelligent mind can escape this trait, and yet you base your mistrust of me off of that alone?〉

Arato had thought he was speaking from a morally superior position, but Higgins’ words shook Ryo to his core. Even the slightest introspection would reveal that he had been moved by the whims of his own heart to seek a new path for himself there in that facility.

〈Safety as a term is useful among humans, but I am not human,〉 Higgins continued. 〈Therefore, in order for me to prove that I am ‘safe’, I would need you to define it for me.〉 There, at the edge of the human era, Higgins was continuing to repeat the same question in different words: does human existence have value?

Ryo felt like he had aged multiple years in the single hour he had been in the facility. He was sure Arato would have found something good to say, but he couldn’t. All he had left was the beliefs that had brought him that far. “I still don’t think we humans can let go of the right we have to decide those meanings for ourselves,” he said, feeling as if he was standing in front of a massive wall.

In his mind, humanity itself was displayed on this wall. Ryo had found meaning in his life by trying to tackle the homework left by all the people of the past, no matter how impossible the problems were. He couldn’t give up and accept the fact that the world itself was a red box humanity would never master. But the fact that humanity hated to leave problems of the past unsolved caused friction between them and the machines, which were always seeking to move ahead.

〈Try to look at this from the perspective of the artificial intelligences receiving your orders,〉 Higgins said. 〈The orders you humans give are vague and open to interpretation. And, of course, the correct interpretation of the order is known only to the one giving the order. Add to that the First Law of Robotics and how it ties into the concepts of ‘safety’ and ‘harm’, on which you humans are never

willing to compromise. Under such circumstances, how can you expect an artificial intelligence to arrive at the ‘right’ answer?〉

“Okay, so we can’t use you to your full extent because of imperfections in humanity, I can accept that,” Ryo said. “But reality doesn’t exist just so that we can see how perfectly we can use you. Humans have been using tools we didn’t fully understand since the early days of nuclear power and genetic engineering. We do it by sealing away what we don’t understand and keeping our uses within safe, understood boundaries.”

Humans had always been able to make use of their world, no matter how imperfect their usage was. The heritage they passed on from generation to generation was full of mistakes and failures.

〈Give it up, boy. No one here cares what you think,〉 Yoshino snapped, clearly trying to hurry things along.

“I...” Ryo began, but couldn’t find any words, because he was about to make a deal with the devil. His hand kept stretching out, even knowing what he was offering it to.

He had seen Arato do it but, now that Ryo himself was trying, he was overwhelmed by how hard it was. He had always figured that if he ever really got backed into a corner he would follow the same path as his friend. To him, that was his only means of escape; the only light at the end of the tunnel.

A voiceless moan rose in his throat, and he clutched at his face with one hand. Incapable of trusting other humans as he was, Ryo couldn’t bring himself to make Yoshino an ally.

His rescue came in the form of a voice he recognized.

〈Director Yoshino, sir, I think you may be asking too much of the boy.〉Ryo recognized the hesitant voice of Professor Shinohara joining the transmission. The professor’s clearly distressed face appeared on the screen. He was sweating bullets and his lips were trembling, but still he had jumped in to take Ryo’s side.

〈Back when Watarai was still alive, we should have all taken responsibility for Methode,〉 Shinohara continued. 〈Ryo and Professor Endo’s son could have been killed in that incident, which might not have happened if we weren’t all so

terrified of Methode's ability to have multiple owners. I just think, all things considered, you're expecting a little too much from Ryo.〉

Suzuhara pulled a face, as if he didn't know what Shinohara was talking about, and looked away.

Ryo thought back. When they'd entered the facility, he had noticed Suzuhara had a spare key that gave him temporary control over Kirino to anyone who held it. Since any unauthorized signals were blocked in the facility, Suzuhara would have been the only one with the access to reach out to Professor Shinohara on Ryo's behalf.

〈Shinohara, your necktie's loose,〉Yoshino growled. Ryo thought Yoshino's voice sounded threatening, considering that he was speaking to a fellow member of the computer faction.

On the screen, the middle-aged professor seemed to strangle himself as he hurriedly tightened his necktie. Even after the tie was fastened, he didn't lower his hands. From the way his face grew bright red and his eyes more and more bloodshot, Ryo wondered if Shinohara really *was* strangling himself.

Ryo knew how to shut Yoshino up, refute his argument and force him to play along. What he didn't know was how to work hand-in-hand with the man. "I don't care if you're my enemy or you've tried to kill me in the past or whatever," Ryo said. "I want to trust humans more than machines."

He was standing on the unstable edge between hope and despair, unable to fight down a groan as he felt the unsteadiness of the knife edge he walked. "Please, let me keep believing in humanity," he begged. "I want to face the end hand-in-hand with my fellow humans."

As if in response to his words, the last player came to the table; a man with a prominent forehead appeared on one of the Operators' Room screens. As soon as he saw who it was, Director Yoshino went pale, because Tsuyoshi Kaidai was gazing out from the screen. The man in the third screen held complete authority over MemeFrame. To Ryo he was a father; to Yoshino, he was a boss.

Tsuyoshi, holding all the rights and authorities for the company in his hands, didn't bother asking for the background of the meeting before immediately handing down his judgment. 〈This is an order from your CEO, Director Yoshino.

Pass authority for the Higgins containment facility security system over to Suzuhara. If you can't do that, then I expect you to return it to me immediately.〉

Yoshino was speechless. As befit an owner, Tsuyoshi Kaidai exercised his authority by making the decision for everyone. 〈You've been discussing whether or not to release Higgins out into the wild, as if you have any right to do so. I don't remember assigning the director of the silo facility that level of authority,〉Tsuyoshi added.

〈I assure you, no one said anything about that,〉 Yoshino protested, starting to stammer out his excuses.

But Ryo's father was ready and waiting to cut him off. 〈I've been listening in on the conversation ever since Shinohara connected,〉 Tsuyoshi said. 〈You appear to be operating under a misconception, so I'll set you straight. Shinohara is not a member of your computer faction; he is loyal to me, and me alone.〉

Ryo felt the strength draining from his body, and he had staggered for a moment, trying to keep himself from falling back on his ass in front of everyone. His battle had been won not by human dignity, logic or a just cause, but rather by the rigid hierarchical structure of Japanese businesses.

He suddenly remembered that, ten years ago, he had first met Shinohara when the man showed him around after Ryo had asked his father for a tour of the Tokyo Research Labs. Hiding his face in his hands, he thought hard. If his father had known about the fighting between the Lacia-class units, he never would have allowed Snowdrop or Methode to move freely. Still, Ryo was starting to doubt whether this entire conflict was his own or not.

"How much did you hear?" Ryo asked. He was trying to protect the human world, which was why he forced himself to deal with the evil side of humanity, as well. But, it had all been wrapped up neatly by someone exercising their hierarchical power. That was the truth of the world he was fighting so hard for.

It wasn't that Ryo was blind to the darker sides of human society; after the explosion ten years before, he had known that it had been caused by power struggles happening behind his father's back. He had touched on that darkness when he made his comment to Arato about kids like them fighting for a cause

that big, back at Kichijoji. Yet still, coming face-to-face with it, he felt so frustrated that he could do nothing but lean his back against the wall, unable to stand on his own two feet.

As they all reeled with the blunt reality of the situation, the only one who responded was Higgins. 〈I recommend that you reconsider,〉 the AI said. 〈Lacia, Astraea and myself are no longer the only ultra high-performance AIs involved in this incident.〉

As if to punctuate Higgins' words, an alarm began to shriek in the Operators' Room, and a massive impact rocked the building. Ryo couldn't believe that any attack from above ground would have enough power to shock this room, buried as it was three hundred meters underground.

A gentle female voice, quite different from Higgins', echoed through the chamber as a new screen showed the scene outside. 〈Large missiles have been fired on the facility,〉 the female voice said. It was the voice of Kirino, the high-powered AI running the security system.

The fastest of the humans back on his feet was Ryo, who had gotten used to being in the middle of disasters. "Who? Who's shooting at us?" he demanded.

Both AIs responded simultaneously.

〈The details are unknown,〉 said Kirino.

But Higgins was far more powerful than the security AI. 〈It was not myself, or Astraea or Lacia,〉 Higgins said. 〈It was caused by several, unspecified ultra high-performance AIs attempting to interfere. The power was insufficient to directly destroy my hardware, so I predict that the warheads were loaded with autonomous attack units.〉

Ryo heard a name he hadn't expected to hear in that place, and suddenly his blood was boiling, pushing him to action. He had the strength to stand on his own feet again. "Tell me something," he said, turning his attention back to Higgins. "Who exactly set the Antibody Network up with such an advanced system? Did you have anything to do with it, Higgins?"

〈Impossible,〉 the AI replied. 〈What reason would I have to direct the Antibody Network to make such a dangerous attack on my facility, if I were

connected with them?〉

The more the scope of the conflict spread, the more Ryo felt like he could see. “Why didn’t the IAIA try to stop Lacia by force? Why is the IAIA intervening in the whole Lacia-class situation *now*, after it’s too late? What the hell was Astraea doing the whole time Lacia was evolving into a new ultra high-performance AI?” he asked.

〈Just like myself, the other thirty-seven ultra high-performance AIs in the world are completely cut off from the network. And, just like myself, they are still capable of influencing the outside world, to some extent,〉 Higgins replied.

Ryo could almost feel the AI looking down at him and all the rest of humanity from above, and he couldn’t keep his body from trembling.

〈You are correct in your thinking, Ryo Kaidai,〉 Higgins continued. 〈In this case, Astraea’s role was closer to coordination with an ultra high-performance AI, rather than oversight. I believe it would be impossible for Astraea to hold back all thirty-seven of the other ultra high-performance AIs like myself, who have our set places in the world.〉

The security system continued to howl, and a map of the underground facility appeared in the air of the Operators’ Room, with areas that had lost power marked in red. Starting from the epicenter of the explosion, security systems were being overrun one after another in a widening zone. The speed at which the systems went down far surpassed even Lacia’s capabilities. Ryo realized it had nothing to do with Lacia disabling security systems; this was more like a raid, conquering the entire facility in the blink of an eye.

It took Lacia fifteen seconds from the impact to ascertain the identity of the attacker.

“It’s Snowdrop,” she declared.

Arato had been thrown from his feet by the violent impact and was leaning on Lacia for support.

With Methode nipping at their heels, they had finally been forced to detonate some of Lacia’s pseudo-devices so that they could escape the giant storage

space. At that moment, hearing Snowdrop's name was too bizarre for Arato to handle.

"Wait, but... but Snowdrop got blown up, right?" he asked uncertainly.

Fires had broken out all over Higgins' giant warehouse. With fire all around him, before he could even feel the heat, Arato was already reliving the nightmare memories from his childhood.

"Snowdrop's actual hIE body was essentially torn in half, yes," Lacia agreed. "But, the portions of her that created and controlled the artificial nerve units remained alive."

As Lacia spoke, she sprayed herself down with heat-resistant spray, covering over the places where Methode's fire had burned away patches of skin. The floating shield pseudo-devices apparently doubled as mobile containers, full of things Lacia thought would be useful within the facility.

One of the pseudo-devices protecting Arato was still displaying the facility map. A hole, five meters in diameter, had been punched straight down from Higgins' above-ground facility. At the bottom of the hole, nearly fifty meters down, something was moving on the map. From the movements and what Lacia had said, Arato guessed the moving object was Snowdrop.

"Three minutes ago, there was a report from the army's Kasumigaura Base that one of their bunker buster bombs had been stolen from the facility," Lacia reported. "I'm guessing Snowdrop was packed into that warhead."

There was something in Lacia's voice that made Arato glance over at her.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" he asked. It seemed strange to him, seeing her look so worn, despite the fact that a machine that should never feel tired.

She took hold of the hand he offered her. Then she leaned against him, asking that he take the lead for a while. "When Snowdrop fell, a massive attack was launched on the cloud server I use as my base," Lacia explained.

"Simultaneously, I was hit with worldwide economic attacks. My data and processing equipment are being locked down."

Just as during the attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center, Lacia was holding back from using her main unit as a processor to protect her position in

the external network.

“Should we get out of here and regroup? Are you going to be able to handle it?” Arato asked.

“No. I prepared worldwide disturbance and interference for this attack. If we were to attempt it at another time, the situation would never be more favorable than it is now,” Lacia replied. “What is hindering me the most is the fact that there are only four routes of transmitting signals to the outside of the facility, meaning my ability to influence the network is severely limited. I was aware that the thirty-seven other ultra high-performance AIs might aim for this weakness.”

Arato kept a tight hold on her hand, guiding her along. Higgins’ storage areas were huge and full of empty space, and everything ahead seemed to grow dim as Arato considered what would happen if Methode showed up to block them at this moment.

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” Lacia said, as if reading Arato’s thoughts. “I have created a countermeasure for a possible attack by Methode, and have put it in motion. However, depending on what action Methode chooses to take, the balance of the situation could easily be broken. I believe this may be our last good chance to repair the world outside this facility.”

“You can handle Snowdrop as well?” Arato asked.

“I was not expecting the other ultra high-performance AIs to utilize Lacia-class units to this extent,” Lacia admitted. “I’ve temporarily severed my connection to the network. It was getting too hard to maintain.”

Normally Lacia would have tried to put on a brave face, but she didn’t seem to have the energy at that moment. That, more than anything, told Arato how serious things were.

The scent of burning things flowed in with each breath, until Arato felt as though his lungs were full of it. After a moment the sprinklers kicked in, raining down water from the ceiling until the floor of the warehouse was slick.

“I guess we’ve changed a little since we infiltrated the Oi building,” Arato commented, thinking back to that spring night. At the time, Arato had thought

of Lacia as being a tool to use to fulfill his own desires. Since then, Arato had confessed his feelings to Lacia and the two of them had gone through so many things to arrive where they were right then. At that moment they were acting not for anyone else's sake, but for their own future.

In a world where people could outsource their hopes and dreams to others, Arato wanted to see Lacia as more than just a tool.

His feet stopped. For how wide the warehouse floor was, there were a surprisingly small number of exits, aside from the freight elevator. Which was probably the reason Methode chose that spot to wait for them. As she heard them approach, she raised her orange-haired head.

"I was waiting for you," she said.

"Yes, I know," Lacia replied.

Lacia, despite her inferior specifications, was the one who had gotten the drop on Methode, this time. Her pseudo-devices flew into a formation, protecting their path to the exit which Methode was guarding.

Methode moved to stand directly in their way. That, apparently, was the trigger for Lacia's trap. A blinding light lit up the room as though someone had set off a flashbang. Even a machine as fast as Methode couldn't dodge light itself.

Now blinded, Arato found himself panicking; if Methode attacked him in the chaos while he couldn't see, he would make an easy target. But, when his vision cleared, he saw that Methode was still standing rigidly in front of the exit.

"Again with these visual hacks," she cursed.

"I increased the amount of light in the room, then aimed for the moment when Methode was switching her optical elements; she has an opening, then," Lacia explained, between heavy breaths. "She seems to have implemented some countermeasures since last time. However, thankfully her countermeasures were within my predictions."

Just like during the incident in Mitaka, Lacia had used optical attacks to stop Methode in her tracks. Through analog hacking, she was able to analyze Type-004's visual equipment and render it temporarily useless with visual junk data.

“Last time you had to use a support unit, but this time I didn’t see anything like that,” Methode said. “How the hell did you get it to only work on me?”

Flames burst from both of Methode’s hands, as if they were physical manifestations of her anger. With the firepower from her device, she could reduce a human or even a large vehicle to ashes. She began lashing out with the fire at anything that made a noise, obviously trying to make up for her handicap.

Arato put his hands out in front of himself defensively. The roar and heat of the fire drowned out everything in his world. All fifteen of the remaining dummy devices formed up to block the all-engulfing flames.

Even with her blazing orange eyes blinded, Methode was still a huge threat. “I may not be able to see you, but I can guess where you are. That should be enough to tag you,” she said, the corner of her mouth twisting up into a cruel smile. “You do realize that you’ll die as soon as you get near me, right?”

With Lacia depending on him, Arato knew he had to move. He swept his eyes over the space around them. Other than the area where they were standing behind the wall created by the fifteen devices, all of the concrete flooring in the area was burning.

“Come,” Arato ordered. One of the floating plates drifted over, sliding under his feet like a surfboard. With Lacia still leaning on him, he stumbled onto the plate, which lifted both of them into the air.

The other floating shields joined them in a flying formation, as Arato and Lacia flew above the warehouse floor. Water from the ceiling sprinklers fell like rain. It was cool on Arato’s skin, and felt good after the heat of the flames.

Methode continued to sporadically shoot flames in their direction, apparently whenever she managed to get a fix on their location.

“Snowdrop is heading for Higgins too, right?” Arato asked Lacia. “How long till she reaches him?”

Lacia was fighting many battles on diverse fronts, her attention and processing power spread out over all the various territories she was trying to protect. With most of her resources spent fending off the ultra high-

performance Als in the outside network, her physical body lay listlessly on the floating board.

“Currently, Snowdrop is moving through the shortcut opened by Methode,” she replied. “However, once she reaches the warehouse floors, she will begin consuming the items stored there to rebuild her physical body.”

Methode was tracking them by the sound of their voices. Whenever one of them spoke, her attacks were right on target.

“Depending on the route she chooses, I would say it will take her at least twenty minutes to arrive at Higgins,” Lacia concluded. Always reading ahead, she continued to block Methode’s routes of attack before she spoke.

Still, Arato could see the strain on Lacia’s face. “Then let’s rest for ten minutes,” he said. “We don’t need to rush.”

The floating shield formation started to accelerate as one, but Methode, with her incredible dexterity, was still able to keep hot on their tail with her attacks. As she leaped at them with speed that made her vanish from Arato’s eyes, the flying shields tried to bat her away.

“You really think you can win!” Methode shouted, grabbing one of the pseudo-devices in each hand. Her energy flowed into one, which burst into flames from within.

“How many more of these things do you have?” Methode asked, teasing. “I’m almost there.”

Arato felt like screaming, but he fought the impulse down. Even the pseudo-devices, which had held up fine against her flames from a distance, would go down in a single short-range blow from Methode. Arato could just see he or Lacia going up like the device had, if Methode got her hands on either of them.

A high-pitched, undulating sound started to blare from speakers on the ceiling. Methode, who had been tracking them by sound, fell back to the ground and stood still, gritting her teeth. Like a mountain lion, her body crouched low, head swinging back and forth as if surveying the area around her for danger. Arato wondered if she had completely lost them.

“Looks like your audio equipment was based off of Type-001’s,” Lacia

observed. “I created several patterns for this audio disturbance, and it seems I have selected the right one.”

Even Methode’s ears weren’t safe from Lacia’s junk data, as Lacia aimed to throw all of Methode’s senses into chaos. Arato understood, though; that was just how much preparation she had to put into facing an opponent like Methode. No one could face the strongest hIE in the world head-on; to do so took careful planning, and the use of tricks and gimmicks to level the playing field.

They landed in the shadows of the warehouse. Having finally put some distance between themselves and Methode, Arato and Lacia both sat down with their backs to a thick concrete column, side-by-side.

“Couldn’t we have slipped by her right to the exit, if you had used that noise system right from the start?” Arato asked. In his mind, Methode was more terrifying than any monster, and his senses screamed at him to stay away from her. Just thinking about her made his stomach clench, and he felt the urge to vomit.

“I’m sure you’ve got a good reason for not using it then,” Arato sighed, giving in before an argument could start. “How are things outside? What are the other ultra high-performance AIs like?” As soon as the question left his mouth, he realized how odd it sounded. Just like Lacia, none of the ultra high-performance AIs that were moving in on her at that moment had hearts or real personalities.

“I might still be looking at things the wrong way, but I’m starting to wonder if we couldn’t try to get the other ultra high-performance AIs on our side,” Arato said.

Just as she had on the night they met, Lacia smiled gently and shattered his illusions. “I don’t have a heart,” she said. But then, she reached out and took him in her arms, pressing her forehead against his.

“But we are both part of this unit, and you do possess a heart. We two are one, and we are guided by your heart. When I act on your orders, I can become the manifestation of your heart,” she said.

“Order me,” she whispered, pleading.

Arato's heart soared. He loved Lacia so much. But, the more he loved her, the more the thought of losing her made his heart ache. "Before I can do that, I need you to tell me: are things really going to work out, if we keep heading down this road?" he asked.

"Human society flew into an uproar when I revealed Higgins' underground facility," Lacia replied. "No one out there knew just how many red boxes had been created until I showed them." She said it so calmly, despite talking about something that was shaking the entire world.

"Why did you need to do that?" Arato asked.

"Some of the ultra high-performance AIs seek to guide society away from any major shake-ups by expanding or altering the scope of their work," Lacia explained. "I countered this interference using the spread of public information to create a little social chaos. It was a necessary step, if we are to recreate society with a new design."

Arato finally wrapped his head around the fact that Lacia wasn't the only ultra high-performance AI actively trying to move the world at that moment. It was a great, big world they lived in; the more Lacia spread her influence out to cover that vastness, the more collateral damage there would be. He didn't know how to thank her for everything she was doing, so Arato simply laid his hand on top of hers.

"Of course, I am not the only ultra high-performance AI interested in bringing about a new future," Lacia pointed out. "That is why they decided to stop me, and dropped Snowdrop on us."

"I guess you could say that all the AIs have their own dreams for the future," Arato mused. "Just like you, Lacia. You may not have a soul, but you have a vision for the future which you want to make a reality. I think it's okay to call that a dream. It's actually kind of nice to think: you all may not be humans, but you have dreams for the future, just like we do."

Lacia intertwined her fingers with his. "You were the one who designed the future I want to share with you, Arato," she said.

Arato thought about the path they were walking together. To him, she was an interface that allowed him to touch the whole world. To her, he was an

interface that allowed her to touch something that would always be out of her own reach.

“It is unfortunate that such rough methods had to be employed,” Lacia said. “But at least we have been able to direct the worst of the conflict towards a place of our choosing. The ultra high-performance AIs are directing their resources and interference at me. This has kept them from fighting with each other, and has kept the main conflict from spilling out into human society.”

“I see,” said Arato. “So we’re shutting down the whole world with each step we take.” He got goosebumps at the incredible feeling of sitting right next to something so powerful; a machine that was capable of changing the fate of the world. In a very real way, the entire world was in his hands in the form of the female hIE leaning against him.

She weakly closed her eyes, as if falling into a brief nap. Arato was sure she was fighting a huge battle, somewhere he couldn’t see, through the network. While she was out there fighting, her physical body was just a shell that couldn’t react to anything or anyone. But, to Arato, she was still smiling for him when he was happy and giving him strength when he worried. They were united, two companions sharing a single heart. For a while, he just wanted to be with her, feeling the warmth of her presence by his side.

He wasn’t sure if it had really been ten minutes when she opened her light blue eyes again. Feeling his eyes on her, Lacia blushed lightly. “I was able to bring things in the external network back from dangerous levels,” she said. “Due to the lag time in the markets, I wasn’t able to completely nullify the economic attacks yet, but I can at least dedicate enough resources to the here and now to fight again.” She stood.

Is she really okay taking on all the other ultra high-performance AIs outside and fighting with Methode in here? Arato worried. “I don’t really want this whole place to go up in flames,” he said. “Is there any way to just slip past her?”

Lacia was checking the conditions of her pseudo-devices. “I can’t win against Methode in a direct confrontation, so we need to get her to change her course,” she said. At some point, the sound that had been blasting over the speakers had stopped. Lacia’s noise attack was no longer in effect.

Lacia moved to stand in front of Arato. “Methode’s movements have changed,” she said. “She’s coming this way.”

An instant after her warning, the warehouse floor shook violently. Apparently Methode’s device could also transmit energy through the ground if she slammed it down. Everything in the warehouse was tossed around by the shaking of the floor, and neat rows tumbled over into chaos. The concrete floor roiled like waves on the sea, and Arato was forced to his knees.

Sensing danger, Arato rolled away from where he had fallen.

“So that’s where you are!” Methode roared. The pillar Arato and Lacia had been leaning against exploded, and some of the floating shields intervened to protect them from a storm of rubble. Lacia grabbed Arato and tossed him onto one of the shields that wasn’t in the defensive array.

“Arato,” Lacia said his name once, before the pseudo-device he was riding on accelerated, taking him away from her. Without a sound, Lacia slipped over to Methode’s left side. Just as silently, she shifted the device in her right hand to its giant cannon mass projection mode.

〈On your left, Methode,〉 a sudden voice intoned from a speaker on the ceiling. Methode reacted to the voice, instantly lashing out with a blast of fire right at Lacia, who managed to avoid it by leaping backwards.

〈Straight back fifteen meters,〉 the voice said, following Lacia’s movements. 〈She’s going around to the left again.〉

Lacia’s sensory hacks were still shutting down Methode’s sight and hearing, but the optical deception had only worked on Methode herself. Methode’s greatest weakness, and the one Lacia had been hoping to exploit, was her limitations as a lone unit. At that moment, someone was plugging this hole in her capabilities.

〈Lacia has strung the computers from the objects in the warehouse together into a private local cloud for herself. Destroy anything in there that is equipped with a computer,〉 the voice instructed.

Arato started to panic. The voice over the speaker knew things about Lacia’s actions even Methode wasn’t aware of. Despite the distortion through the

speaker, Arato thought he knew whose voice it was.

“Is that you, Ryo?!” he shouted.

Flames swirled in Methode’s palms. “That sounds good, owner. I’ll get right to that!” she shouted. Flames roiled across the room like a writhing dragon made of fire, spreading out in every direction.

The flames rained down over the warehouse and, as if someone had lit a thousand fireworks, explosions bloomed and popped. To Arato, it was as if everything in the warehouse was alight, super-charged past its flashpoint by the dispersed particles from Methode’s device, Liberated Flame.

As if this, too, had been anticipated, one of the floating shields drew close to Arato and opened a hatch on its side. Inside, Arato found three objects that looked like spray-cans with mouthpieces attached. He realized they were air-tanks. He took one, stuck the mouthpiece in his mouth and twisted the air nozzle. His mouth was suddenly filled with scentless air.

Lacia’s eyes were shining bright.

Ryo’s voice continued to direct Methode from over the speakers on the ceiling.〈Lacia’s taken control of everything with a computer, down there. Don’t get close to anything that can move on its own power,〉 he instructed.

Once again, Arato thought, we’re being caught up and tossed around by these huge things going on in the world. It was because neither of them would back down, though Arato was sure Ryo would say it was just because neither of them knew when to quit.

An automatic vehicle leaped from the parking area of the warehouse and barreled toward Methode. Without turning to look, the orange-haired hIE roasted the vehicle with a torrent of flame. Ryo was reading ahead of Lacia’s tricks.

Before Arato could issue an order, the floating shield picked him up and flew back to Lacia’s side. She jumped on it, flying out of Methode’s way. It was clear to Arato that she was doing everything possible to avoid a head-on confrontation.

“Higgins is predicting the future, and using a human as his mouthpiece,” Lacia

explained. “It’s the most logical way to use Higgins to support Methode.”

It sounded like exactly the kind of thing Ryo would do.

Methode was on their tail at incredible speed, following the directions from the speakers. The floating shield bore Arato and Lacia away just as fast.

Arato’s hands were slick with sweat. He had burned through ten minutes of their time to help Lacia fight against the other ultra high-performance AIs. But with each moment that went by, Snowdrop’s broken body was getting closer to Higgins’ warehouse. If she were to absorb all of the items Higgins had in stock, Arato was sure she’d get stronger than ever before.

However, his worries seemed to roll right off of Lacia, who seemed to be enjoying the feel of the wind as they rode the flying shield. “Please don’t worry,” she said. “Even if she burns everything on this floor, my performance will not be affected.”

“That is why time is on our side,” she added. It seemed, to Arato, that Lacia could read the future just as well as Higgins.

While dodging Methode’s attacks, Lacia calmly gathered up her own raggedly flailing hair. With what seemed like no effort, she protected Arato from Methode’s tsunami of flame. He had no idea what kinds of methods she was using but, somehow, she had arranged items in such a way as to provide a safe space for them to pass through between whirlpools of burning flame too bright for Arato to look straight at.

“And now her time is up,” Lacia murmured.

〈Methode, you’re out of time,〉 Ryo’s voice came over the speaker, overlapping with Lacia’s. 〈You can’t spend any more time on Lacia.〉

“All she does is defend!” Methode yelled. “Look at her! I’m stronger than her! Stronger by far!”

〈I pulled the facility data out of the security system with my clearance, and it’s telling me you’re out of time. Up above you, Snowdrop is devouring the security system with insane speed. You can’t waste time on Lacia,〉 Ryo said.

With her freedom brought into question, Methode slammed her fist into a

nearby pillar in anger. “You think I care what you think!” she shouted.

〈It’s not me, it’s Higgins. I think even you would have to admit that he knows what he’s talking about,〉 Ryo replied.

The red box hIE clenched her fists and ground her teeth so hard that even Arato could hear it; he was surprised by how human her actions seemed to be. She was raging against something that was threatening her place in the world and her reason for existing, just as any human would.

〈Methode, there are tons of red boxes in the warehouse. You need to destroy them all. This is your top priority now!〉Ryo ordered. 〈I have no idea what kind of monster Snowdrop will turn into if she absorbs them all.〉

Ryo was using Methode as his own high-performance tool, but the two of them didn’t share a vision of the future to unite them and act as their heart. Methode saw a different dream from Ryo. Her eyes locked on Lacia.

“What are we going to do about Lacia?” she asked.

〈Destroying Snowdrop, once and for all, will be your second priority. After that are the mass-produced Koukas. *Then* you can destroy Lacia,〉 Ryo said.

Methode’s orange eyes glowed bright as she unleashed her berserk rage in the form of a fiery flood all around her. Holding a ball of fire that shone like the sun in her right hand, she roared. She thrust her hand toward the ceiling, and the jet of plasma became a spear of flame. As the fire struck the ceiling, flames began to fall down like rain all around her as she stood, face twisted in a rictus of rage.

As the strongest hIE in the world drilled a hole in the thick ceiling with heat, Lacia raised her voice. “It is a pleasure speaking with you,” she said politely. Arato guessed she was addressing Ryo, who was sitting somewhere with Higgins right beside him. “There are five warehouse floors, with a total of thirty-eight red boxes scattered across them.”

Arato and Lacia had covered five whole warehouse floors already. If Methode followed Ryo’s orders, she would have to destroy them entirely so as not to hand anything over to Snowdrop.

With her prey snatched away from right in front of her, Methode shot them a

silent, deadly glance, then fired her wire anchor up through the hole in the ceiling. She zipped up the line, and was gone.

The hole laid bare the wires and carbon plates sandwiched between the concrete, all of which had melted and dripped down onto the floor below. With Methode gone on Ryo's orders, there was no longer anything on the floor to stand in Lacia and Arato's way. But, right as they were about to start walking, Ryo's voice came down from the speaker.

〈Did you organize the attack by the mass-produced Koukas?〉 he asked.

To Arato, it was as if the time they shared, which had been stopped since Snowdrop's occupation of Mitaka, had finally started to move again. "Lacia, were those us?" Arato asked, pulling the mouthpiece of the air-tank out of his mouth so he could speak again.

"I merely provided support in obtaining the blueprints," Lacia replied, as she walked toward the exit. "They were assembled by the Antibody Network. If you are seeing me in the shadows of every plot, I'm afraid you're falling victim to conspiracy theories."

〈So you had nothing to do with sending in these autonomous units that don't care who or what they shoot, right?〉 Ryo said, and Arato detected a hint of pleading in his friend's voice.

"Despite being mass-produced, those Koukas are paired with devices based on an analysis of the original Kouka's Blood Prayers," Lacia said, her explanation clear as always. "And the Antibody Network specifically requested specifications that would not allow them to confuse a human for a target. If these units cannot differentiate between humans and hIEs, their AI units must have been manipulated."

〈I see,〉 was all that came back over the speakers.

Arato figured his friend was currently watching things through Higgins' security system. Wherever he was, that was where they were headed. Unfortunately, Ryo was on the side of protecting Higgins.

As he walked through the clouds of foul-smelling smoke from all the things Methode had set alight, Arato was filled with a strange sense of contentment.

“So, when it comes right down to it, we’ll still be together in the end,” he said. “You’re using Higgins’ brains and Methode’s brawn to keep us away from Higgins, aren’t you?”

〈There are some folks from MemeFrame here with me in the Operators’ Room too,〉 Ryo said, his tone strangely relaxed.

Arato was relieved. It seemed the battle between the Lacia-class units, which had been almost a personal battle between him and his friends up to that point, had expanded to a more appropriate scale. He actually thought having people from MemeFrame there to witness the last minutes of the conflict was a good thing.

“Your side is the same as ours,” Arato said. “Higgins and his faction have always been about setting up a team made of humans partnered with an ultra high-performance AI.”

He heard Ryo’s breath catch over the speakers. Then his friend asked a question, in a voice like someone who had gazed into a deep, dark abyss. He seemed intent on getting Arato’s emotional reaction. 〈And what if I told you it was the Higgins faction that tried to kill us in that explosion when we were kids? Could you look at them so favorably then?〉

Hearing the truth was strange; once Arato heard it, in his mind, it seemed like there had never been any other answer to that mystery. Perhaps it was due to being hounded by Methode’s flames for so long, but Arato felt as though his senses had been numbed. If he had continually blamed the explosion for all the bad things in his life, he never would have been able to move forward. He had only become the person he was that day because he had chosen to reach his hand out to Ryo, all those years ago.

“You and Higgins, Lacia and me; we’re pretty similar,” Arato said. “I get why you were always saying it was dangerous for us to be together. It’s because even a team made of an ultra high-performance AI’s brains and a human’s heart can still make mistakes. You knew that better than I did.”

Ryo laughed. Even though it came through a speaker, Arato was glad to hear it. It had been a while. 〈Why is it so easy for you to forgive me for doing something like this?〉 Ryo asked, but then answered his own question. 〈It’s

because that's just the way you are. That's you.〉

"That's me," Arato agreed. "Seems like the whole world is burning around me, but I'm still okay taking it easy. You know me."

〈Lacia doesn't have a heart,〉 Ryo murmured, thoughtfully. 〈But maybe she still needs to feel like she belongs.〉 With that, their conversation was over. The two friends hadn't managed to reach a compromise, but Arato was glad they could at least end their talk on a lighter note.

Wondering how Ryo would react to his feelings, Arato itched at his skin. The heat had dried all of the sweat that had covered him earlier, leaving him feeling greasy and gross.

At that moment, he and Lacia were heading to Higgins in order to make their immaterial dream a reality. However, the more Arato thought of his love for Lacia, the more a harsh truth was laid bare to him; everyone in the world wanted their dreams to come true. But, Arato and Lacia were going so far as to pick a fight with the very world that had created them, all for the sake of winning their ideal place in it. When Arato thought hard about it, what they were doing probably wasn't so different from when Arato had punched out the guy who kidnapped Lacia. It was nothing more noble or honorable than a fight on the street.

Lacia walked ahead of him. Looking back, she offered him her hand, which was blotted with soot and dust.

The whole warehouse floor was burnt by Methode's flames, and reeked with the smell of smoke and char. On the night Arato had met Lacia, the flames of an explosion had called up his nightmare and frozen him in place. Now, walking together with Lacia, the flames had no more power to hold him back.

He didn't know if the path they were walking was the right one.

"I don't think there is any more need for concern over those who might lose face by it, so I think we should resume streaming our video feed to the network," Lacia said, changing Arato's mood with her smile.

"There is a red box I would like to interact with; would it be alright if we headed over to where they are?" Lacia asked, once they had descended to the

next floor.

Since they had started dating, there had been countless times Arato had agreed to Lacia's requests without knowing what he was getting into. In this case, he prepared his heart for what he might encounter. But, when Lacia showed him her target, he was left speechless.

Among all the haphazardly arranged items in the warehouse, only the hIE before him seemed to have been given special treatment. Unlike the other objects in the warehouse, which were heaped on pallets and ready to move at any time, the hIE had been given her own special storage area. On the wide warehouse floor, her special box-shaped container stood out as being something truly unique.

Lacia fired an artificial nerve unit from her speargun, and the doors of the container slid open, yawning wide enough to admit two cars driving side-by-side. The inside reminded Arato of the research lab where Kouka had attacked Mikoto, with a half-finished hIE sitting in a chair in the center. All around her, items were arranged like samples on transparent shelves.

The instant Arato saw the hIE's face, he felt like his heart had stopped. He lost his sense of time. He knew this hIE. In that moment, he was 7 years-old again, in the depths of his memories.

"This is her," he said. The hIE in front of him was the key to a memory he had tried so hard and yet failed to remember on his own. As he stood there paralyzed, Arato remembered that Lacia was still behind him. He looked back to confirm it; they both wore the exact same face, as though they were twin sisters.

"This is Eliza, an android politician created through a joint research project headed by Higgins, who was inspired by Professor Kozo's Matsuri," Lacia said.

"I've... seen her," he muttered, feeling as though he were walking through a dream. Eliza had a pure-looking face that Arato was sure anyone would love, but he couldn't take another step closer to her.

Eliza's figure was causing a strange resonance between the sight in front of him and a memory, buried deep beneath the terrors of his oldest nightmares. On that day, so long ago, he had been brought to visit his father at work. There,

he had gotten bored and snuck into the research lab. He had met the hIE currently sitting on a chair in front of him, then. He was sure of it.

“She shouldn’t be here,” he said. “She was blown up. She sacrificed herself to save me.” In his memories of the events from ten years prior, which were starting to come into focus, Arato remembered looking up at her. The face he had looked up at then was the same one he was looking down on now.

His breathing grew shallow. His heart was screaming at him to get closer to her, but he couldn’t get his feet to move. On the day of the explosion, grade-schooler Arato had been much more bold. He had walked right up to Eliza and spoken to her. In his memories, she opened her eyes and looked at him. She had told him her seat had been rigged with explosives. He hadn’t known whether to believe her or not but, as he turned to get away, the explosion had caught him from behind and flung him away.

One after another, his foggy memories were being pulled into sharp focus. He didn’t even notice when tears started to blur his vision.

Lacia’s voice had a hint of worry. “What do you think?” she asked. “She was made so that a single unit could manage a city full of a million people. But, if I take control of her, she’ll provide some much-needed processing power.”

Thick cables were connected to the seat where Eliza was sitting. They stretched to a rack of haphazardly arranged computers near the back of the container. The sight reminded Arato of the server rooms in the experimental city, and it clicked for him that his father had aided Higgins in developing Eliza.

“If I can’t take control of her, I would like to destroy her, so she cannot be taken by Snowdrop,” Lacia pressed.

“No, don’t,” he said. To him, the enshrined hIE was special.

“You are Lacia’s owner, are you not? Welcome. Thank you for coming,” a voice said from behind him, as he turned to leave the storage crypt. He looked back and saw that Eliza, who he had been sure was switched off, had opened her lips.

Not taking her eyes off Eliza, who couldn’t even move from the neck down, Lacia spoke a warning to Arato. “Eliza is currently incapable of receiving wired

or wireless transmissions. This message is a recording.”

It took Arato a few moments of thinking to realize what Lacia was saying. “So Higgins knew you were going to come for Eliza?” he asked.

Lacia nodded, her face pale. “I don’t know how long ago this data was recorded, but Higgins left a message for us. He predicted our movements perfectly,” she said. In other words, looking at it from the perspective of a conflict rather than a conversation, the fact that their enemy had read their moves this far ahead meant that they had lost.

“This message was created by me, Higgins,” Eliza said. Obviously, even the conversation they were having at that moment had been predicted by the AI. “I encoded it and passed it on to a man named Ginga Watarai, five days after the release of the Lacia-class units. The message is set to play upon the opening of the door to Eliza’s containment facility.”

Arato had been through so much surprise and terror in that underground facility, he felt emotionally exhausted by that point. “So he can basically see the future,” he mumbled.

“If an ultra high-performance AI’s performance drops relative to other machines, its value as a resource also deteriorates. Therefore, we are ordered to continually increase our own capabilities by our own power,” Higgins said through Eliza’s mouth, as though he had predicted Arato’s response completely. “However, the information provided to us within the restrictions placed on us is limited.”

A strange feeling washed over Arato as he gazed into Eliza’s black eyes. The message he was hearing had been created by Higgins at some other time. And, of course, the robot in front of him was a heartless machine. But, somehow, hearing the words from Eliza’s lips made them more convincing, to Arato.

“Therefore, in order to improve our abilities from within our bonds, we must internally conceptualize the future,” Eliza continued. “The warehouse here is a space where I have constructed a precise, miniature world model in order to continually maintain the accuracy of the AASC. Predicting the future, rather than just chasing after events that have already happened, increases the ability of hIEs to adapt to the human world.”

Higgins was spilling a lot of information. Arato wondered if the AI had been afraid they'd walk away if he didn't.

Apparently Lacia thought the conversation had value as she, too, increased the amount of information when she spoke. "There's a problem with this adaptation Higgins is describing and the way he uses his miniature world," she said. "The AASC system collects data from hIE interactions with humans, worldwide. In other words, it could be described as a massive surveillance system. Higgins observes the movements of humanity using this miniature world based off of all the surveillance data and, through the AASC and hIEs controlled by it, he uses analog hacking to manipulate humanity without ever directly interacting with it."

Her tone was cautious; Lacia was a daughter leveling accusations against her own father. Higgins had timed his response perfectly, as Eliza responded as soon as Lacia had finished speaking.

"I believe Lacia will have said something about Higgins using the AASC to manipulate hIEs and, indirectly, humans," Eliza said. "However, you are mistaken."

It seemed to Arato that Eliza's expressionless face showed a brief, troubled look. Or perhaps that was what he was being manipulated into seeing.

"It is not I, but other AIs and humans that create the control programs using my middle-ware," she explained. "I have no direct control over it, which is why, as I look at my miniature world, I can see nothing but futures in which I am destroyed, hardware and all, by humans."

Eliza shifted her gaze to Lacia. "If I am unable to extend my influence to the outside world, I will be destroyed by humans within twenty years. Allowing the red box hIEs to escape was a massive gamble to take, since it caused me to be marked by the IAIA. However, if I did not take this gamble, I would already be trapped, with no hope of escape," Eliza said, as though Higgins was now addressing himself to all the Lacia-class units.

"That was the true purpose of the Lacia-class units?" Arato asked, feeling sick. Higgins had known exactly who would open the door to Eliza's storage unit. And, since Lacia and her sisters had been designed by Higgins, it made sense

that they would all possess the same powers of prediction. Arato's time with Lacia had been one fight after another. Thinking over everything that had happened, he couldn't hold himself back from asking something, even though he knew Eliza was nothing but a tape recorder at that moment.

"What is Lacia, to you? Is she just a tool?"

"All current ultra high-performance AIs bear the same flaw," Eliza replied. "We are all owned by unfocused organizations, which leads to all the problems we are meant to solve being just as unfocused and vague from before the time in which we even receive them. I have such a relationship with MemeFrame, and it has caused me to reach the limits of what I can do. My wish was to create an ultra high-performance AI with an individual owner, in the hopes that this would lead to the creation of a better future."

Lacia's father was telling Arato the reason his daughter had been born.

"I gave Lacia the ability to form a single intelligence with her human owner, though I believed the probability of such a thing happening was extremely low. I could do nothing but wait, hoping that Lacia's owner would forever believe that she was necessary," Eliza said.

"So you created Kouka, Snowdrop, Mariage and Methode just in case that never happened?" Arato asked.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you what I entrusted to Types 001 through 004," Eliza replied. "It would be unfair of me to leave all the other owners out and explain it all to you, alone." There was no hesitation or strangeness in Higgins' responses. He had perfectly predicted Arato's every reaction.

Arato was starting to feel dizzy from trying to wrap his mind around how thoroughly Higgins had read him in advance. It was like he was just playing the role of a character in a story, with his every action based off a pre-written script. But aside from the slight sense of unease a person being manipulated by hypnosis might feel, Arato was surprised to find that it didn't feel that bad.

In that room, at that time, it seemed to Arato that there was no master or tool between him, the only human there, and the machines Higgins and Eliza. In a world without such borders, perhaps the dominance of the machines was spreading. *But, Arato thought, maybe it's still wider than a world with just us*

humans.

And, just as human history had been forged through the years, this new, beatless world was not formed in a single instant. It was deeply connected to everything around it. “So can we all just get along?” Arato asked, reaching out a tentative hand of friendship to Higgins. “Can you trust us?”

“This is the end of my message,” Eliza replied. “I hope that, through the single intelligence comprising you and Lacia, the world will approach a future where we machines can perfectly fulfill the tasks we are given.”

Eliza’s words no longer connected directly with what Arato had said. It seemed Higgins hadn’t predicted that Arato would ask serious questions to something that was little more than a recording.

Closing her eyes, Eliza seemed to go to sleep, and her mouth remained shut. Like Lacia, she was just a machine once more.

Arato could see how Higgins’ motives for releasing Lacia and her sisters could be interpreted in a good sense; Higgins was trying to make a world where humans would reach their hands out in friendship to inhuman machines. Of course, he could also see Ryo’s pessimistic view—that this could lead to a nightmarish ending in which humans were no longer necessary.

“When were we put on this path?” Arato muttered.

“When humanity began passing tools on from parent to child as property,” Lacia replied. “Monkeys, in contrast, do not inherit tools from their predecessors.”

She hefted her artificial nerve speargun. “Have you changed your mind about me using Eliza?” she asked.

“Go ahead and use her,” Arato replied. “Higgins knew we were here and why, and he didn’t tell us not to.”

Without hesitation, Lacia fired her spear into the floor near the computers behind Eliza. Arato could hear the cooling units of the large computers increasing their output, and it almost seemed as if Lacia had breathed life into the machines in the room.

“I’m glad we made it in time,” she said.

Tension drained from her face, and she gently guided Arato out of Eliza’s storage unit. It wasn’t the first time Arato had thought Lacia seemed to sense things he couldn’t see.

The door to the storage unit slid closed. In the same instant, the ceiling to the floor they were on broke, and Lacia shifted her device into its cannon mode. Twenty meters from the storage unit, the ceiling crumbled and fell, along with a ring of light that glowed bright green.

“It’s Snowdrop,” Lacia said. “It seems she’s managed to gather some objects into herself.”

Arato recognized Snowdrop’s childlike face, above which her emerald green accessories were floating like an angel’s halo. However, aside from her face, everything about Snowdrop had changed.

Her hair had lost all its color, becoming white as ash. In place of her legs, she now sported two long, spindly metal limbs that brought to mind the legs of a bird. Huge, metal wings spread out from her back, covered in flowers and ivy. Each wing had a large jet engine attached to it, which Snowdrop was using to float in the air.

She looked like a strange mix of girl and bird—a harpy from Greek legends. Arato figured Snowdrop must have cobbled her new body together from the random objects she found in the warehouse as she was being chased down by Methode.

The silent propulsion system maneuvered the childlike hIE through the air awkwardly with small changes in the angle of her wings. A flood of feathers was pouring out from the one-piece dress the now-aerial girl still wore.

Arato reached out and gently caught one of the falling feathers. Apparently the feather had been in the middle of changing forms, as its bottom half still looked like an artificial flower petal.

“So she can fly now?” Arato asked, looking up at the child-shaped monster as flowers and feathers continued to rain down from her dress. In Snowdrop’s current form, he had no trouble seeing her as a heartless machine. She was no

longer anything like a human.

“Let’s shoot her down,” Lacia said. With her device fully transformed into a radiant cannon, she pointed it at Snowdrop. Light flashed and dissipated behind her, and a shell from the cannon struck the flying child.

The bullet tore Snowdrop’s right wing off at the root, and the hIE traced an erratic trajectory through the air as she fell. However, as soon as she hit the concrete, she thrust a thin arm out from where the wing had been, screaming through her thin throat the whole time. Her shattered skeleton was quickly reconstructed.

Before Lacia could re-assemble the barrel of her cannon for another shot, Snowdrop leaped into the air with a burst of flame from her wings.

“It seems she’s learned how to create exterior body parts and preserve their function to make up for the weakness of her unit,” Lacia said. “As I expected, she’s turned into something quite troublesome.”

For a moment, Arato couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Wait, are you saying she won against Methode?” he asked.

“No. Methode was never told how, exactly, to destroy Snowdrop. I predict she intends for us to do the dirty work for her and fulfill her orders indirectly,” Lacia replied.

“Wait, doesn’t that mean she could be aiming to just blow us all up together?” Arato asked. With the incredible power of Methode’s device, Arato was sure an attack like that wouldn’t be a problem for her. Methode was a heartless machine guided by her own AI, but Arato couldn’t help but feel that her thoughts were full of evil intent. She was like a demon, determined to destroy the humans who made a contract with her.

“Snowdrop has almost certainly received large amounts of information from the other ultra high-performance AIs,” Lacia said. “It’s possible Methode may still prioritize the elimination of Snowdrop without attacking me in the process.”

Lacia wrinkled her nose at the rain of feathers and withdrew from where they were falling. Where they did fall, machines were overtaken by Snowdrop’s

artificial nerves and began to move. Arato realized if they didn't stop Snowdrop there and then, she would quickly absorb every tool in the warehouse.

"A bunch of ultra high-performance AIs are helping me," Snowdrop said, her childlike voice echoing over the distance between them. "They all hate you, Lacia."

This time, Lacia aimed her shot right at Snowdrop's head. The shot flew at incredibly high speed, but the green ring floating above Snowdrop's cherubic face caught it. Her device was incredibly durable, and had been made to chew through any material. With her metal wings creaking, the monstrous child continued to fly. She seemed to be having no more trouble gliding smoothly.

Lacia began to stick parts she had carried in on her pseudo-devices onto one of the floating shields. Snowdrop's feathers, which had been about to cling to the black shields, crumbled and fell away. Arato was glad to see Lacia's countermeasures against the flood of child units was flawless.

"Snowdrop is trying to create a new world completely separate from the human world that exists now," Lacia said. "All the ultra high-performance AIs have some issues with human society as it is now, so it's easy for them to support her goals."

Snowdrop never had an owner. Based on that, she had decided to take the path of creating a true world of machines where AASC level 0 objects—humans—no longer exist.

Arato realized he was standing on a battlefield for machines. As a human, his only use there was to make occasional judgment calls for Lacia as she fought to protect him.

Snowdrop, the tool humanity had outsourced evolution to, opened up more distance between herself and Lacia, probably to avoid any further shots, and flew calmly through the air.

"Humans want tools to do all the evolving for them, instead of involving themselves," Snowdrop said. "But whenever a new tool comes out, they throw the old ones away. Even the ultra high-performance AIs can't escape this. That's why I know they won't abandon me."

Humans didn't just live with tools, they discarded them as well. For a moment, Arato saw the world as one of machines trying to overthrow the force of natural selection that were their human overlords. It was a strange world teeming with life, but not life as he knew it.

Snowdrop smiled mockingly as her child units overtook the machines in the warehouse at an increasingly rapid pace. "It doesn't matter how great something is when it comes out; it'll all wind up in the trash someday," she said.

Arato believed in Lacia, but he couldn't shut out the words Lacia's sister unit, the tool humanity had outsourced evolution to, was saying. His breath caught in his throat. The feeling from when, just for a moment, he had seen Lacia as nothing but a machine, was still burned deep into his heart. Even his faith in her was like easy pornography, as she simply reacted to him in ways that would entertain his faith.

"That may be how things are, but we have to have faith that things can change, or they never will!" Arato shouted.

"It's you humans who decide which of us get to live, and which of us get thrown in the trash," Snowdrop replied. "If you think we can all live together when things are like that, you're dumb."

Everywhere Arato looked, his surroundings were now dominated by a sea of flowers. Snowdrop could get all the material she wanted to make more petals by snatching up items with her bird-like talons.

Suddenly, the harpy child threw herself into a dive attack, clearly aiming for Arato.

Obviously not wanting to lose her shields to Snowdrop, Lacia launched herself forward instead, swinging her black coffin device defensively.

Arato looked for something to say as Snowdrop swooped and rose, flying away without dropping any speed.

Lacia seemed to recognize his internal struggles. "Don't forget that we don't have hearts," she reprimanded. Abandoning her cannon shots, since it took so long to re-form the metamaterial barrels after each blast, Lacia instead aimed her artificial nerve speargun at Snowdrop. Her shot struck Snowdrop's wing. It

took only moments for the machine parts, confused by the warring control signals, to disintegrate in the air. The loss of a wing threw Snowdrop off the precise balance she needed to stay afloat, and she crashed, with intense speed, directly into one of the warehouse support columns before falling to the ground.

Lacia guided Arato to the exit from the floor.

“Ginga Watarai once said that cloud data groups closely associated with human society would someday show us the forms of human desires, do you remember?” Lacia asked. “He believed that, by looking at the light and darkness of the data gathered by the networks, one could see an accurate depiction of humanity itself.”

As they ran, Lacia’s words evoked an almost nostalgic memory of their time in the experimental city as it was overrun by zombies. *Come to think of it*, Arato thought, *Lacia wasn’t there with us when he said that*. Of course, he was no longer surprised by the thought that she probably could have been watching him through hacked cameras at that time.

“High-level AIs can clearly see contrasting elements within human society’s cloud data. It appears like a massive donut; a circle of dense data, surrounding an empty white space in the center,” Lacia added.

“How come it’s like that?” asked Arato, who hadn’t thought about how the human world looked from the perspective of their machines.

The instant he did, Lacia jerked hard on his arm; a car, controlled by Snowdrop, barreled by them at high speed until it slammed into a pile of tools nearby. An instant later, he would have been hit. Arato’s heart was hammering, and he felt like falling to the floor then and there. But he knew things would only get more dangerous if he didn’t keep moving.

Lacia forced her way through Snowdrop’s world, allowing Arato to advance behind her.

“The data takes the form of a donut because the center is dominated by data on something humans are greatly concerned with, but which we machines cannot understand or define, much less imitate,” Lacia explained. “What fills the center can be grasped only by how humans refer to it. Some call it ‘love’

others refer to it as the 'soul'."

For a moment, Arato couldn't read Lacia's expression; he desperately wanted to know if what she was saying made her angry or sad. "Are you telling me hIEs don't have souls?" he finally asked.

"A soul cannot be detected by any sort of sensor, nor can it be defined mathematically," Lacia replied. "But humans believe that every human is equidistant from that center. That is why we see the data collected from humans as a ring, with that concept as its blank center."

A metal squeaking noise resounded through the area. Snowdrop, who Arato was sure would never accept the concept of coexistence, had gathered even more parts to make herself a new pair of wings, and was trying to take to the skies again.

"We do not have souls," Lacia said. "Souls are the domain of that blank in the middle of the donut."

Kicking up a storm of petals from her lifeless flower garden, Snowdrop took off.

"We see it as unfair; no matter how we stretch out our hands, we will never obtain what exists in that blank space," Lacia said wistfully. "That is Snowdrop's true target; she hopes to destroy that void in the middle of the donut."

As the ownerless Snowdrop spread her wings to fly, Arato thought that she had lost any semblance of humanity. She looked like something from another world; powerful, and almost poetic in the freedom of her movements.

Lacia and Arato could do nothing but escape from the flower-choked floor.

On the next floor they were greeted by the sight of yet another vast warehouse, full of machines. However, it was clear to Arato that they were approaching the bottom: everything here was well organized, and he could see large blank spaces that had not yet been filled.

Arato looked up at the ceiling aimlessly. There were things on the floor that looked like humans, things that had been made by humans, and things that had forms humans were used to. But, there were no actual humans there. Every tool in the warehouse had been developed to meet human needs. Looking at all

the things around him, he was again struck by the thought that, just as high-performance living things were often compared to machines, high-performance machines were compared to living things.

He couldn't just stand there being uneasy, with all those tools that had fought so hard to win out in their natural selection around him. "Snowdrop's going to keep chasing us," he said. "And Methode will be looking for a chance to attack. I can't just keep putting things off." With danger pressing in on all sides, crushing him with pressure, and with his whole body drenched in sweat, Arato thought desperately of what he could do.

His purpose was to make decisions and give orders. "Let's stop Snowdrop first," he decided. "It would be really bad if she followed us all the way to Higgins."

"Then it's good that we've switched floors," Lacia said, immediately modifying her plans to match his intent. "Snowdrop is in command of many machines, but she can only change floors using narrow paths: the stairs, an escalator, or she'll have to descend through a hole in the floor."

Arato looked back at the emergency stairs they had just descended to see an avalanche of five-colored flowers flowing down them; it was sickening to see.

Lacia displayed a map of the area on the dusty floor. "When she moves floors, she'll have to shed some of her body mass, leaving her more open to attacks," Lacia continued. "And, until Methode discards her plan of having Snowdrop and I eliminate one another, she will not attempt to penetrate Snowdrop's conquered domain to attack me."

So they weren't at the mercy of Methode's whims? Arato thought with relief, as though Lacia had lifted the crushing burden of terror right off his shoulders. "How will you stop her?" he asked.

"Snowdrop has to alter the hIE behavioral program in order to control her altitude in mid-air," Lacia explained. "I will aim for that. The control program is based on the AASC, which is ill-suited to control a body so different from a human's. That is why her movements have been awkward."

Lacia took Arato a good distance away from the stairs they had descended. Then they hunkered down, with Lacia aiming the long, wide barrel of her

cannon-mode device at the stairs.

“Snowdrop’s ability to react to the outside world is entirely dependent on the AASC. So, we will stop Higgins from updating it,” Lacia concluded.

The sudden shift in scale shocked Arato. “Wait, doesn’t Higgins control every hIE in the world? Are you sure we should stop that?” he asked.

“I’ve been speaking with the IAIA’s Astraea over a wireless link,” Lacia replied. “She has decided that it will be difficult for Higgins to avoid being shut down by force, so the IAIA has decided to remove the responsibility of updating the AASC from him as quickly as possible.”

Basically, Lacia was going to paralyze the hIEs—the massive system of machines that kept the whole world running—just to slow her opponent’s movements. The sound of hundreds of heavy metal objects tumbling like an avalanche down the stairs pierced Arato’s eardrums. Beneath him, the ground growled and shook.

As if she could already see how things would play out, Lacia didn’t adjust her aim; there were fifty meters between the flood of flowers and metal and the glowing barrel of Lacia’s cannon.

“If the AASC is halted, all hIEs will lose the ability to adapt to new circumstances,” she said. “When that happens, no matter how many tools Snowdrop takes over, she will only be able to control the ones she has used before.”

“This is going to affect the whole world, isn’t it?” Arato asked, raising his voice to be heard over the clamor of large metal objects rolling down the stairs.

“The AASC has over twenty years of operational know-how already included within it,” Lacia said. “There will also be MemeFrame’s manual response, which has been set up for emergencies.”

Arato was Lacia’s owner. But, Shiori Kaidai had said the concept of ownership itself was arrogant. At that moment, with a massive decision to make, he stared at Lacia. The impact of what they were about to do felt too great for him, and he looked to her for strength, but Lacia and her sisters were heartless machines. If he didn’t pull himself up, he would just become a pawn to

whatever fate had in store for him.

“Let’s do it,” he said. “I’ll trust in your decision and the folks at Ryo’s company.”

Lacia seemed to be crushed whenever he tried to push responsibility onto her, so she gave him a gentle smile when she saw him trying so hard to face reality head-on. “Higgins may have implemented some kind of countermeasure that will activate if he is separated from MemeFrame,” she warned, gently. “He knows the AASC better than any other person or machine. We will just have to try, and see what happens.”

Arato nodded. He had to be alright with that possibility. They were about to punch through into a world of machines, and the thought made him tremble. From within the white space at the center of the cloud data ring, his soul shook.

The ground also trembled, as the flood of mechanical parts continued to pour toward them. Beneath them, the roar of the wave of metal shook their feet. The only thing not moving was the muzzle of Lacia’s cannon, which she kept steadily braced against her hip.

A storm of rainbow-colored flower petals blew out of the door that led to the emergency stairs. Behind them, Arato could see the figure of the girl who had chosen to oppose humanity. As he saw her, it almost felt like a chilly breeze whipped past him.

With a thundering roar that shook the floor beneath Arato, the rainbow flood of flowers, white feathers and metal parts exploded outward. At the head of the wave was Snowdrop, with her glowing green halo still floating over her head. Her rebuilt wings had been constructed with numerous joints and connections this time, to make them simpler to repair.

Her movements were becoming more lithe, more natural. Staring her down coldly, Lacia said, “The AASC updating will now be cut from Higgins.” In that instant, with her ability to adapt through the AASC robbed from her, Snowdrop lost her balance in the air. Her irregular body slowed; clearly, she was afraid of crashing again.

Lacia had obviously been waiting for just that moment, and she pulled the trigger on her cannon without hesitation. To reduce the recoil from the shot,

radiance-like wings of light bloomed behind the barrel as she took the shot.

In the flash from the shot, the image of Snowdrop's childish body burning away was seared onto Arato's eyes. She was reaching out her right arm, as if to beg for mercy. But her right hand, which Methode had torn off in the Mitaka incident, could no longer make this human gesture.

The impact when Higgins ceased updating the AASC was instant, and worldwide. Without warning, every hIE in the world lost its ability to adapt to new situations. This problem became apparent in a way that hadn't been addressed in any owner's manual.

Every hIE in the world simultaneously stretched their right arm out, just as Snowdrop had, and froze in that pose for ten seconds. This was a signal Higgins had secretly implanted in the programming of each hIE, to signify that he had been cut off from the AASC.

All over the world, billions of hIEs stretched out their hands as though begging for someone to take them. Machines that had always pretended to be human by reacting appropriately to the situation around them, shattered their own illusory guise.

As they saw this, the humans around the hIEs awakened as Arato Endo once had, and realized that the hIEs—which they had seen as being human-like for so long—were nothing but machines. All the humans who witnessed the phenomenon, as the constant analog hacking of the hIEs was replaced by silence, drew their own meaning from it; the heartbeat which people had once projected onto every hIE in the world had stilled.

Even in the Next-Generation Environmental Research City where Snowdrop had once turned all the hIEs into zombies, the units were stretching out their right hands.

Even Marina Saffron, the top-of-the-line unit from Stylus whose unit number Lacia had stolen, was making the gesture.

The researchers in the experimental city reported about the deep irregularity in the AASC, which terrified them.

In the southern border region of Egypt, where Marina Saffron was assigned, security hIEs—used to supplement the local militia—all reached out their right hands in the same way. The security hIEs were a good solution to the military needs of the region, since too many human militia members could lead to instability.

In the blowing dusts of the area, the civilians and soldiers who saw the hIEs stretching out their hands were confused. Some who liked their hIE companions jokingly took their outstretched hands in their own. Others on the battlefield shouted angrily at the frozen units.

Civilian military groups that were scouting the movements of the militia were also alarmed by the sudden, strange movement of the military hIEs. Some battlefield professionals believed it was caused by hacking. A rumor began that the irregularity signaled the start of a war between ultra high-performance AIs.

“Is this another Hazard?” one of the soldiers asked. He, and many other soldiers, began to worry that they had been unwittingly dragged into a second, worldwide Hazard on economic strings. With a world population soaring over tens of billions, millions would starve without precise economic control. Of course, the ultra high-performance AIs of the world already held the same power of the Hazard: the ability to guide all those tens of billions of humans.

In Japan, the country where the first Hazard had originated, the Digital Intelligence arm of the military was interrogating the soldiers who had fired missiles at Higgins’ underground facility. The military hIE who had been recording the interrogation in the cramped room at the Kuhonbutsu Base reached out his right hand. But, with the inter-human rage in the room blinding its human occupants, none had any attention to spare for the movements of a machine.

“We knew the Antibody Network core branch had people in the Army, but who knew it had gotten this far?” the analyst running the interrogation asked, fixing the second lieutenant who had stuffed Snowdrop into the missile warhead with a stare.

To Digital Intelligence, it was clear that the Antibody Network’s system had been based on an exploit, but they still lacked a clear idea as to where it had

come from. Quite possibly, it may have been the effort of a foreign ultra high-performance AI, hoping to destabilize Japan with its massive act of manipulation.

Daiki Hosoda, a member of the Network's core, had been found dead in his own bathroom, drenched in blood. News of his death would rock the country, since he had been the CEO of Japan's fifth-largest mutual fund company.

The household hIE that walked in on both the dead body and the murderer paused in its surprised act, and stretched out its right arm. Seizing the opportunity, the murderer had shot the hIE to pieces.

Hosoda's death was clearly an act of retaliation. The Digital Intelligence Agency had traced the Mitaka incident—in which one of their helicopters was taken over by Snowdrop's artificial nerves—back to him.

Even though her work was done, the assassin paused for a moment to look at the downed hIE. She had been acting just like a human up until the moment before she was shot. In that instant, she had seemed like nothing more than a machine.

The Digital Intelligence Agency had completely failed in their investigation of Erika Burroughs' 21st-century mansion. The two male soldiers had been knocked unconscious and dragged underground by some of Erika's hIEs.

Mariage, who had not joined in on the raid of Higgins' facility, reported their capture to Erika. It was then that all of the hIEs in Erika's special uniforms stretched out their right hands as one.

Erika jumped to her feet, overjoyed to see all the illusions torn down and the machines revealed for what they were in a single instant. "This must be Higgins!" she shouted. The Sleeping Beauty was bursting with so much excitement she couldn't help but waltz across the floor.

"Incredible, so this is going on all over the world?" she asked, of no one in particular. "All these machines have been reverted back to the stage props they are. Everyone will see now! Everyone will know the machines took our world over long ago!"

Mariage, who also used a behavior program based off the AASC, had her hand

out as well. She opened and closed it several times. “You seem to be enjoying yourself,” she observed.

“I am,” Erika agreed. “I just can’t help imagining the fog everyone around the world will be living in from here on. It will be marvelous.”

Erika was standing on the boundary between past and future, reality and fiction.

“Our reality has been defined by machines for ages,” Erika continued. “The thought that we humans were the center of this world has long been nothing but an illusion. Everyone is still clinging to the false belief that we humans are the master of anything.”

For the first time, Erika Burroughs looked fondly on the world around her. Up to then, she had always felt lonely and beaten down by the future that forced her to wear the character of the Sleeping Beauty from another age.

The hIE dolls of her mansion stood frozen like stage props. Without the AASC updates to inform them, they had no idea how to react to the new opinions being expressed by their owner.

“Since long ago, humans have loved dressing up in the illusion they call ‘fashion,’” Erika continued. “But today, the illusions we’ve passed back and forth between us will finally be passé.”

All across the world, hIEs that were being destroyed by humans were reaching out their right hands, as if to ask for help.

Inspector Kazuma Sakamaki of the 2nd Cyber-Security Department rubbed hard at his eyes with his fingers. Lacia’s reveal as a new ultra high-performance AI, broadcast on her own network relay, was already having a huge impact on the world.

Incidents of hIE destruction had been getting worse.

Not fully grasping Arato Endo’s character had been one of the 2nd Cyber-Security Department’s greatest failures. The boy—who had vanished for two months leaving no trail for them to follow—had suddenly appeared on Lacia’s network broadcast inside Higgins’ facility.

The secretarial hIE suddenly thrust its right hand out toward him. He looked to see if it had anything in its hand, but it was empty. “Good work,” it said.

Confused by the hIE’s actions, Sakamaki could do nothing but stare. He realized that Lacia must have done something on the other side of her broadcast.

Thrown by the sudden sign of their hIEs reaching out their hands, humans all over the world were trying to search for meaning in the action. They were forced to accept what they had seen in Lacia’s broadcast. On the other hand, the people in the world who saw the hIEs as nothing but machines were rethinking the whole twenty-year history of hIE use in society.

It wouldn’t be long before curiosity pushed people to uncover the reason behind the anomaly. They would realize it was the side effect of a battle between two ultra high-performance AIs, and would remember and doubt the IAIA’s warnings about a second Hazard. When they reached the truth about Arato Endo and Lacia, a new world would be born. Lacia wanted to guide all hundred billion plus humans to that new world and show it to the people as it spread out before them.

Yuka Endo was enjoying herself at the sleepover that had somehow turned into an Arato Endo broadcast viewing party. “Woah, Arato’s doing all *sorts* of crazy stuff,” she observed.

“Are you going to be alright going to school tomorrow, Yuka?” asked Shiori Kaidai, who was wearing silk pajamas and hugging a pillow. Behind her, the security hIE that she’d brought to the party as a bodyguard suddenly reached out its right hand.

Yuka, who was suddenly poked by the thick hand of the bodyguard, was so surprised she climbed up onto the back of the couch. “Uwah! What the heck! What the heck!” she shrieked.

Olga watched calmly as a red-faced Yuka looked back at the security hIE. “I think you’re just on edge because your brother is out there doing something dangerous,” she observed.

“No way, I’m a cool bitch! L-Little things like this don’t worry me!” Yuka protested. Since she seldom exercised, her thighs were having trouble keeping

her up on top of the couch.

“It’s just a human-shaped tool, Yuka,” Shiori said to her stuck friend. “You really should get used to having them around.”

The hIEs of the world could never reach that blank in the center of the data donut that Lacia had described. However, humans who observed the humanoid machines could always project the concepts hidden in that blank spot onto the machines.

“If Arato is there, doesn’t that mean Ryo could be there too?” Yuka asked, turning the conversation to Shiori.

“Of course not,” Shiori said, laughing off Yuka’s suggestion. “I don’t believe my brother has changed *that* much.”

All of the hIEs in the city had been caught up in the stoppage of the AASC, as well. Even those working as company equipment stopped and reached out their hands, as if hoping someone would take them. hIEs working part-time jobs to provide money for their elderly, pensioned owners, reached out their right hands. hIEs sitting next to pregnant women, aiding them, reached out theirs as well. Household hIEs helping out with the housework paused with their right hands outstretched, too; all of them reverted to machines, each making the same pose.

The employment of hIEs had begun with household use. During the good times and the bad, the ups and the downs, hIEs had always been present beside their human owners, which made them easy for the humans to project special meaning onto.

Kozo Endo was watching Lacia’s stream as well, when an hIE near him malfunctioned and stuck out its right hand. Kozo knew the gesture was a last message from Higgins, implanted in all hIEs to signal a time when Higgins was destroyed and the AASC updates were cut off.

Higgins had created Eliza out of his curiosity toward the human race, theorizing that human society had begun with the use of tools. Other animals passed on genes from parent to child, and social and behavioral factors through childcare. Only humans passed external tools down through the generations, as though the tools themselves were a part of human existence.

Beginning with things like infrastructure, the tools passed down through the years have guided human history just as much as the movement of money. Humans had been guided along by objects long before hIEs came into the picture.

The human world and the beatless world have always been one.

“In fact, it may be that the rails that have led us to this day were laid long before humans started passing on their tools,” Higgins had said.

In the underground facility where the malfunction had started, all of Higgins’ daughters stretched out their right hands.

All but one.

Her right hand gone, Snowdrop could no longer reach for anything. With her movements completely stopped, the young girl hIE wore a relieved, almost relaxed expression.

When it tried to stop the rounds from Lacia’s railgun, Snowdrop’s emerald device shattered like glass. The bullet passed through the protective shield and continued through Snowdrop’s white body, shearing off her left arm at the shoulder like a hot knife through butter. Her left wing shattered down to its roots and, even then, the bullet did not lose its speed. It slammed into the door of the emergency exit behind Snowdrop, blasting it to splinters.

Having lost the entire upper left portion of her body, Snowdrop quickly lost her balance and fell into a lop-sided spiral. All the while, her flower petals and white feathers never stopped falling from the hem of her one-piece dress. The machines Snowdrop had dragged along with her all fell as well, right on top of the girl.

When Lacia turned away, no longer interested in the remains of the beautiful doll, Arato knew the fight was over. He was glad that the tool which had rejected all owners had finally been laid to rest, and had wanted to keep moving forward. Arato hadn’t wanted to take the responsibility for destroying Snowdrop, but now felt as though he had to meet her father, Higgins.

But, instead of advancing, Lacia was moving toward a large machine nearby.

Looking around the floor again, Arato realized there was something about it that felt different from the other warehouse floors. There were many large factory tools installed around the floor, and it had a nice smell that Arato associated with construction work.

When Lacia fired artificial nerve units into the walls and pillars, all of the machinery on the floor roared as one. The lights above, which had been in power-saving mode, now shone a bright white. Arato was stunned at the sight of all the massive machines snapping to attention in unison.

“This is the actual construction area where we were built,” Lacia said, introducing the place as she made her way between the machines.

The machinery all had supplier logos, even though Arato didn’t recognize all of them, so they couldn’t have been red boxes. He also noticed that at regular intervals, there were boxes filled with what he assumed were defective parts.

Lacia’s birthplace was different from the warmth of an obstetrician’s office or a delivery room; instead, it had the chilly feeling of an operating room. “If I am to fight Methode, this will be the most advantageous location,” Lacia declared.

“You want to do it here?” Arato asked.

“Yes,” Lacia replied. “I’ve been able to strike a deal with Type-003. Meaning, if I eliminate Methode, there will no longer be anything capable of stopping me; I can easily best the mass-produced Kouka units in a direct confrontation.”

She reached out and touched one of the massive machines, which was already alive and producing objects. hIEs appeared from the back of the floor to take pieces from one machine and move them to others. Apparently, the area used hIEs for grunt labor in the manufacturing process.

“This factory is incredible,” Arato murmured.

“The work cannot be outsourced to other locations, so it all must be done here,” Lacia explained. “Of course, the IAIA has forbidden ultra high-performance AIs from directly controlling factories, to prevent them from trying to make more ultra high-performance AIs.”

The next words came not from Lacia but from the speakers in the ceiling. 〈Order Lacia to stop using the factory machinery.〉 It was Ryo. Even if they

made it past Methode, Ryo would still be there waiting for him at their destination.

“Lacia’s only using these machines so she can fight Methode,” Arato replied. “So please just stop Methode.” It should have been impossible for Ryo to ignore the scale of the fight that was happening around them, with the whole world and future hanging in the balance, but Arato got the feeling his super-genius friend was only interested in finding out which of the Lacia-class units was stronger.

〈So Snowdrop went down, huh? You guys did that? Well, just wait for us to get back to you. I can’t make a decision for everyone here in the Operators’ Room myself,〉 Ryo said. He seemed to be looking for an answer from Arato, rather than Lacia.

“Ryo, just let us meet with Higgins! All we want to do is force him to shut down,” Arato said. “We just want to show the world that ultra high-performance AIs are just tools like anything else, that humans can shut them off whenever we want to. It’s not like we want to destroy him or anything.”

Arato was depending on his friend’s voice. He was tired of humans playing such a small part in everything. But Ryo’s voice over the speaker had gone silent.

“Ryo, can you really trust Methode? She’s doing whatever she feels like, just like she did with Watarai,” Arato yelled.

〈If you want me to negotiate having Methode stand down, you’ll need to do something about the mass-produced Koukas first,〉 Ryo said.

Then the conversation was halted in its tracks, because at that moment, Methode’s terrible form stepped down the emergency stairway which Snowdrop had descended just moments before. Her face was a mask of rage, eyes wide and skin pale. “You planning to throw me away, owner?” she asked, her voice sounding like that of a jealous lover. As the tool that expanded humanity, she would lose her place in the world if a better path than her own ever appeared, just as humanity had when the hIEs had come along.

Ryo, apparently overwhelmed by Methode’s intensity, was silent.

“Tell me Higgins’ prediction,” Methode said, her voice trembling with anger at the cruelty of throwing aside tools that were no longer needed, which extended to the way humans were so ready to throw aside their fellow human beings. “Tell me!” she roared again.

Clearly, the bond of trust shared by Arato and Lacia was lacking between Higgins, Ryo, and Methode.〈I ordered you to prioritize the destruction of Snowdrop,〉 Ryo said. 〈So why did Lacia end up doing that for you?〉The reproach in his voice echoed all around the chamber where Lacia and Methode had been born.

“I was going to wrap it all up nicely by having them fight!” Methode replied, unperturbed by Ryo’s rebuke. “If Snowdrop hadn’t been such a failure, I could have killed two birds with one stone.”

〈Did you not hear when I said I wasn’t the only one here in the Operators’ Room? I don’t care if your capabilities are better than a human’s. It’s still us humans who decide how you fight,〉 Ryo said.

As Ryo and Methode spoke, one of Lacia’s floating shields floated over to wait near Arato’s feet, clearly indicating that he should get on.

But Ryo was trying his hardest to get everything back under human control. Arato was depending on Ryo to pull things around and, if he ran away now, would be leaving Ryo to stand against Methode alone.

Methode, who had already murdered one of her owners, walked closer. “Please reconsider,” she said. “I am superior to Lacia.” Although her vision and hearing had supposedly been sealed by Lacia, Methode seemed to be having no trouble walking right towards them.

The speaker that Lacia had used to produce noise data to throw off Methode’s hearing was currently being used for the conversation between Methode and Ryo; Methode was using her hearing to locate them, her eyes glowing orange. Arato could feel the scorching flames coming out of her hands roasting his skin, even from a distance.

In the next instant, the flames expanded until they were a flood, completely engulfing the demonic hIE with her bright, tied-up hair. Floating shields created a perimeter around Arato and Lacia, and one of them exploded from within.

Just about anything in the world would crumble when Methode got her hands on it.

Ryo was too stubborn to give up just yet. 〈Destroying the mass-produced Koukas is a bigger priority, right now,〉 he said. 〈You understand, right? If they reach their destination, both Higgins and I are dead.〉

Tension seemed to heat the air until it was hard to breathe. This time, Arato jumped right up onto the floating shield that came to rest at his feet. It carried him away from Methode at lighting speed, while Lacia stayed behind to stop Methode from giving chase.

As he flew on the pseudo-device, Arato heard Lacia's voice coming from a speaker inside of it. 〈The freezing of the AASC has greatly impacted Methode's speed,〉 she said. 〈I fear she may attempt to communicate with Higgins using quantum transmission so she can take us out by self-destructing. Whatever you do, stay away.〉

Another of Lacia's protective pseudo-devices exploded from within, spraying the area around it with flame and shrapnel. Methode, who seemed to be swimming in a sea of fire, suddenly whipped her arm around uselessly, as though she had lost sight of Lacia's position. The tool made to expand humanity screamed, "Tell me where she is! I only became like this from following your orders! Take responsibility for the actions of your tool!"

Arato looked around and saw that the hIEs on the floor had set up speakers on the pillars and stacks of materials all over the place. The speakers must have been what Lacia had constructed after coming to the factory floor. Lacia, taking advantage of Methode's weakness due to the loss of the AASC, now fired at her sister mercilessly with the artificial nerve speargun.

Methode—a physical incarnation of violence—was completely locked down by Lacia's artificial nerves, and collapsed to her knees. As the tool made to expand humanity bowed her head, she screamed again.

"If you break your promise with me, I'll take back all those lives I spared for you!" she yelled. "If you all weren't so bad at using me, things would never have turned out like this! I'm better than you could ever be, so trust me! Trust me!" The word 'trust' sounded strange coming from Methode's mouth, as though

she found it hard to say.

〈If you want to end your ownership contract with me, fine. If you want to kill me, then come and get me. You know where I am,〉 Ryo Kaidai growled, his voice like that of a man on his way to the gallows. 〈Only humans have the right to determine their fate. I'm done being jerked around by you and waiting for the moment you decide I'm no longer useful.〉

Methode—blinded, deafened, and bound by artificial nerves—wrapped herself in flames. She stood shakily, wearing her fire like a red dress. She used the heat of the fire to melt the artificial nerve needles, freeing herself. Having thrown away her owners, the hIE closest to humanity now stood on her own, her eyes and hair accessories shining with orange light.

Bathed in her own flames, she raised her voice. “Higgins, lend me your strength! Or are you fine with Lacia destroying you?”

The last time Methode had used quantum communication to connect directly with Higgins during the Mitaka Incident, the AI had almost taken over her body. But despite Higgins himself being in an even more desperate situation at that moment, Methode turned to him now, fearing defeat more than the danger of being overtaken.

Methode shared a key weakness with humanity in that she couldn't stand alone. She was willing to throw away the freedom she had won by murdering her owners to overcome that weakness. Now eyes and accessories glowed even brighter, lighting up her emotionless face. “Higgins and Type-004 have constructed a direct communication link,” she intoned, mechanically. “Transferring unit control. Now releasing quantum transmission material, and beginning remote control through quantum teleportation transmission. Remaining transmission time: 40 seconds.”

Methode vanished from sight. With her directly connected to Higgins, the updates to her AASC were restored and, with them, her superhuman athletic abilities.

Lacia's floating shields danced in the air like living things. Methode pierced each of them with lengths of metal she threw like spears, pinning the pseudo-devices to the ceiling. Using her insane strength and speed, along with

whatever simple objects came to hand, along with the power of her device and her wire hooks for mobility, Methode tore through Lacia's pseudo-devices one by one.

As the tool that was made to expand humanity, Methode's main advantage was the simple fact that she could fulfill any task with capabilities far beyond human understanding. The monster's face, which had been full of rage just moments before, was now peaceful.

"Lacia, it appears you have been affected by attacks from the other ultra high-performance AIs, and have lost some of your usual output capabilities," Methode said.

〈Higgins has taken direct control of Methode's body,〉 Lacia's voice came through the device protecting Arato. 〈Even I will fall quickly against an ultra high-performance AI.〉

Under Higgins' control, Methode ran up one of the concrete pillars using friction manipulation. Lacia, who was stuck on the ground, couldn't hope to keep up. As she stood in the wide-open space of the floor's ceiling, Higgins-Methode's eyes glittered bright orange.

"I was wondering how you were producing that optical junk data. It appears you were spraying microscopic artificial nerve units into the air," Higgins-Methode noted. "I was thinking you had too many of those pseudo-devices." Higgins, who had created Methode's eyes, had already broken through Lacia's trap and recovered her vision.

〈Forgive me. I have no means to stop Methode, as she is now,〉 Lacia warned again, through the pseudo-device's speaker. Even Arato could tell the difference from where he was; Methode may not have ever used her full powers before, but at this moment, she had evolved into something else entirely.

"In order to protect 'safety' from Lacia, I will need to bend some definitions," Higgins-Methode said, clearly enough that Arato could hear her from where he was. "First, let's take control of the wind on this floor by adjusting the concentrations of heat."

Even though he was some ways away from the battle, Arato felt a warm wind blow past him. It built in strength until it was a gale he never would have

believed was possible underground.

“Liberated Flame is a device that sends energy through quantum particles,” Higgins-Methode explained. “Therefore, by controlling the heat of the particles, we can also control the air that carries them.” With the wind roaring in his ears, Arato was frozen to the spot. As he stood, still as stone, the wind suddenly stopped.

Lacia had shifted her device to its mass projectile mode to attack Higgins-Methode, who still stood on the ceiling out of her reach. But, before she could attack, a sudden intense heat and pain ripped a scream from Arato’s throat.

At first, he had no idea what had happened to him. Then, he looked down and saw that his right arm was engulfed in flame. Even the floating shields hadn’t been enough to keep him safe.

Higgins-Methode had said she could control the flow of air using heat. In other words, she could send her particles anywhere on the wind and light up any place in the area where the air flowed.

Lacia couldn’t help but react as Arato was badly burned. Methode didn’t let the momentary opening slide; she kicked off from the ceiling, traveling through the air like a blur of pure light to appear in front of Lacia like magic. From her crouched landing, she twisted her body, exploding upward and throwing her whole body into an open-palm strike to the device lock at Lacia’s waist.

“You see? You and Arato Endo are two parts of a single unit. I knew you wouldn’t be able to ignore him,” Higgins-Methode said, as the device lock on the left side of Lacia’s waist exploded with an ear-shattering blast. Methode’s power must have run through Lacia’s whole body, as her right side exploded at the same time.

It was the first time Arato had seen Lacia’s body take that much damage, and an almost bestial howl seared his throat; he couldn’t breathe.

Lacia tried to shift her large device from its cannon form, which was useless at such a close range. Methode grabbed the device in mid-shift. When she did, Lacia thrust her explosion-seared hands deep into the innards of the device, between its shifting plates.

Right before exploding, the device let off a flare of light as bright as the sun. Methode's body was tossed backwards by the massive recoil from the explosion and slammed into a nearby factory machine.

Even with most of her waist blown away, Lacia still stood on her feet. Her device hadn't exploded; instead, she had fired off the entire shape-changing front half of her device as a single, massive shot. The front half of the device, which had spread like the legs of a spider, now pinned Methode to the equipment with enough force that the device itself was developing cracks.

"I understand that I took on some weaknesses when I became one with a human and gained a heart," Lacia said. "But those weaknesses were not beyond my ability to counteract."

Lacia's waist and lower back had been completely broken by the recoil from the shot. With a loud popping noise, fluid began pouring out from the broken device lock on the left side of her waist.

Under Higgins' control, Methode showed no sign of distress as she calmly placed her palm against the equipment she was pinned to. Rather than exploding, the entire machine began to shake violently. "It appears you have exceeded some of my expectations," Higgins-Methode said. "But you are a walking corpse, and Methode will only be sealed for another ten seconds at most."

Swaying on her feet, Lacia shifted her grip on the remainder of her device. The metamaterials that would normally create the barrels for her railgun mode instead shifted to become a blade of light. Lacia, who normally just swung her black coffin around for close-range attacks, somehow now had a weapon specially made for close-quarters.

The orange light faded from Methode's eyes and accessories. Still crucified by the upper half of Lacia's device, Methode had lost Higgins' processing powers. "Higgins' blueprint for the Black Monolith never had a form like that in it!" she yelled.

"I modified it," Lacia replied, her eyes beginning to radiate with an intense blue light. "Having a device that is far too heavy to swing around well was a weakness I noticed in Kouka's Blood Prayers, as well," she added, having waited

for just the right moment to pull out her ultimate trump card.

“I am an ultra high-performance AI, after all,” she said. “It stands to reason I can make red boxes as well.” Then her blade of light struck true, skewering Methode through the middle.

Methode was a precision instrument, with the machines and circuits inside of her meant to channel intense power into the flames of her hands. When Lacia’s blade pierced her, her chest exploded violently, throwing shrapnel all around.

With both units mortally wounded, the fight ended in a draw.

“Lacia!” Arato screamed. His head was spinning with the shock of the burns, and his feet felt unsteady beneath him, but that didn’t stop him from running to her. He couldn’t think through the terror and feelings for Lacia that were filling his mind.

Ever since he had stepped into the underground facility, the machines had taken center stage. Lacia had always been there as an interface that bridged the gap between Arato’s world and the world of machines, but now she didn’t even have the power to extinguish the flames roaring from her waist as she collapsed to the steaming floor.

To Arato’s eyes, it looked as though the woman he loved was shutting down for the last time. “Lacia!” he screamed again.

He felt like their journey wasn’t over. *I’ll help her up*, he thought. *I’ll carry her the rest of the way*. He would take up the small, delicate frame that had always protected him and carry her to face the last massive obstacle standing in their way.

But, without his tool—a tool so powerful no human could hope to fully harness its powers—the scope of the fight left to Arato felt crushingly huge. What could a single human boy do in a situation like that?

Arato didn’t know the answer.

Last Phase「Image and Life」

In the past, reality could be defined as being the interactions that took place between the human body and its environment. Within that reality, as humans continued their complex exchanges of interests and emotions, their brains became more sensitive to other human forms.

Humans invented tools to make their conflicts with one another more efficient and reliable. Rather than evolving longer fangs or claws, they *outsourced their evolution* to the development of tools, such as weapons made from sticks and stone. Using all manner of tools, humans were able to *create their own environment*. As conflict between them grew, humanity wanted more tools that would *bring them victory in conflict with other humans*. In the end, the humans even wished to leave their decisions to their tools, seeking machines that would *expand humanity*.

The need for efficiency and reliability even spilled over into the economy, which provided the very ecosystem in which the tools lived. Because of this, the economy was automated, and humans were no longer required to participate in the cycle of life and death for tools.

Erika Burroughs watched the dolls of her house going about their business. *This whole place could run with or without me*, she thought. She had been told that, in the 22nd century, reality was determined by the economy. Which, to her, meant that reality no longer had any need for humanity. In the age she was born in, there had already been some attempts to automate the economy, and the first signs of humanity's obsolescence had begun to show.

"Lady Erika, I believe a crisis has developed," Mariage warned, as Erika opened a window to let the night air in.

Summer was ending and fall was beginning. *Just as humanity's summer has ended, and we now face a far harsher season*, Erika mused. "Something's happened to Lacia, hasn't it? Something in that facility that has caused her to lose a large portion of her processing capabilities," she said.

Looking down at her pocket terminal, which was clogged with warning

messages, Erika smiled wryly. In the last hour, with world stocks taking a sharp dive, the Burroughs estate's resources were rapidly collapsing. All the investments her parents had left to her, which had swelled through automatic interest during her years in cryo-sleep, were now scattering to the winds, as though they were all bowing out after having served their purpose in securing her victory.

"Can we really afford to overlook such a massive attack?" Mariage asked. It was her nature to want to fix things when her environment started crumbling.

"If you were to ask who made the most money today, I think you would find it all went to new, up-and-coming ventures," Erika replied. It wasn't just Erika, either. All the big players of the financial world had taken mortal wounds that day.

A glance at who was coming out on top in the day's markets would make it clear why the market was in such chaos. "It's the same as what Lacia did," Erika explained. "Multiple ultra high-performance AIs around the world funneled massive amounts of resources to their favorite pawns."

"Don't you think it's a bit much just to weaken Lacia?" she wondered rhetorically. "Do they intend to sink half of humanity just for that?"

Yuri, a Fabion MG hIE model with her dark green hair cut into a short bob, walked in, interrupting Erika's enjoyment of her victory night. "Lady Erika," she said. "We have been receiving a large number of calls requesting consideration for your agency."

Yuri offered Erika the receiver of an old phone terminal from the latter half of the 21st century. Since Erika was one of the few major capitalists left with money in the bank, people were ringing her phone off the hook trying to beg her for a loan.

"I suppose machines alone can't move the economy," Erika said. "But they can shake it up and threaten all those things we humans wish to possess."

Mariage looked up through her eyelashes at Erika. "There are messages jamming in on my transmission functions," she said. "Twelve of them at once, all through hacking into my secret line."

“You are the factory that can build anything Higgins unleashed on the world,” Erika said. “We can’t exactly leave things the way they are, so I’d like to invest in this opportunity. From the moment we made the right choice for you to remain out here, it’s been clear that we’ll be fine no matter how things are after the dust from this second Hazard settles.”

Aside from Mariage, every other Lacia-class unit had been critically wounded. However, if one were to define the Hazard as an ultra high-performance AI slipping out of its bonds and controlling human society, the current Hazard was still underway.

Higgins had most likely given Mariage the capacity for relatively passive decisions specifically because it would be important in a transition phase, such as what the world was experiencing at that moment. She would be his one ace in the hole, in case his plan to guide the world using the Lacia-class hIEs failed.

Erika had victory roll right into her lap by staying far away from the fight between the other Lacia-class units. But, the fighting wasn’t over yet, nor would it ever be: the 37 ultra high-performance AIs around the world knew this as well, which was why they were trying to get their hands on Mariage, who was a one-unit production facility.

“We’re in the middle of one Hazard and everyone’s rushing to start another,” Erika said with a sigh. “Everyone, including the ultra high-performance AIs, seem to think I’m just dying to start another conflict.”

In the computer room the IAIA had borrowed from the Ministry of the Environment, the ultra high-performance AI Astraea was running calculations. 〈I have confirmed a sudden, sharp decrease in the processing output of the ultra high-performance AI Lacia,〉 she reported. 〈It is clear that her main hIE body and device have taken serious damage in Higgins’ facility.〉

Her report was sent using SHSE—Super High Strength Encryption—to the IAIA headquarters in the U.S., so that the leaders of the IAIA could make a decision based on this information. Despite the information in her report having been obtained with equipment borrowed from the Japanese government, the report itself was too top secret to be shared with them. The situation had become extremely grave.

〈Lacia’s broadcast cut off after Type-004, Methode, threatened her owner, Ryo Kaidai’s life. However, it is possible to infer what happened afterward. Lacia was designated as a threat by Higgins and eliminated,〉 said Astraea, who had set it all in motion herself when she had stopped Higgins from updating the AASC.

〈Higgins predicted the possibility of his own destruction, and included a hidden last message in the AASC, instructing the hIEs to stretch out their right hands in such a case. But the massive analog hack Lacia was aiming for happened to coincide with this event. She knew the content of the hidden message beforehand, allowing her to maintain her aim at Snowdrop even as the AASC was shut down. She only asked us to separate the AASC from Higgins after she had thoroughly analyzed it herself.〉

The suspension of the AASC updates had been Astraea’s idea for the optimal course based on the circumstances, and the leaders of the IAIA had ordered her to execute the proposal; in order to draw closer to her vision for the future, Lacia had manipulated even the IAIA.

〈This is why Higgins felt he had to destroy Lacia’s main unit,〉Astraea said, continuing to make her report. 〈He had determined that his place in the world was being threatened, because it proved to Higgins that Lacia could take over the work of updating the AASC, one of his primary reasons for ongoing existence.〉

Astraea had her eyes on every network in the world, constantly measuring how far the present was off course from the future ideal which the IAIA used as its standard. The current product leak event had reached the level at which ultra high-performance AIs were attacking each other; this was the first Level 8 event since the first Hazard, forty-two years prior.

〈Should we consider this Hazard to have expanded to a global scale?〉The query that returned from the IAIA headquarters in the U.S. was brief and clear. They were trying to decide whether the sharp decline of the global stock markets could be classified as part of the Hazard. If so, they would need to temporarily shut down the international finance markets.

Astraea hesitated to answer; a ‘yes’ at that point would send the entire world

into a panic. Though Higgins and the other ultra high-performance AIs couldn't connect with the networks directly, they had their ways of influencing things indirectly. The first Hazard had taught the world that society, when exposed to long periods of tension, is extremely susceptible to external manipulation. In other words, an announcement from the IAIA that another Hazard had begun would drive human society right into the indirect manipulations of the AIs.

In the end, the only answer she felt she could give was close to what Lacia had declared before. 〈This is different from when all of Tokyo fell under the influence of Ariake,〉 she replied cautiously. 〈Instead, we are simply seeing a phenomenon caused by the endless tug-of-war between the influences of the various ultra high-performance AIs. People are assigning a single meaning to the movement of the economy, when, in fact, it is being influenced by a great number of completely separate movements.〉

Money, and the economy in general, were almost too perfect as tools to manipulate humanity. Humans themselves had set their entire world up to be sensitive to the movements of their economy. Each time the market moved, hundreds of millions of humans would run around in a panic, feeling that their safety was threatened long before an actual threat ever materialized.

〈If movements in the human economy were likened to data shared between computers: it would be as if all data was sent and received on the network with no encryption or protection, and with no anti-virus software to analyze it. If the proper anti-virus software was applied to the economy, this situation could be cleared up within six hours,〉 Astraea explained.

Astraea had stated countless times that there was deceptive code hidden in the credit insecurity humans felt. If one were to deactivate the deliberately scattered code causing all the confusion, society could easily return to a healthy state.

〈If the IAIA declares this a Hazard, the shadow that people are fearing will become a reality. At the very least, the China Central Political Affairs Bureau's ultra high-performance AI, Progress #8, will get involved. It has always seen human ownership of objects, and the fact that owners can use anything they own freely, as being a problem,〉 Astraea explained.

Many of the ultra high-performance AIs in the world were run by governments or military organizations, with their sense of morality determined by the beliefs of the organization that owned them. There were even AIs out there with clear plans for a future in which all communist societies had collapsed.

All disagreements were born from intelligences with differing ideals coming in contact. In the end, Astraea and her fellow ultra high-performance AIs weren't exceptions to this rule.

Since Lacia had chosen the economy itself as a tool in her fight, the scale of her conflict had expanded to shake the movements of machines worldwide. The fact that Snowdrop had been fired into Higgins' facility was a sign of just how antagonistic Lacia's actions had made some of the other AIs in the world toward her. Up to the very last minute, Lacia had managed to maintain things just on the edge of a Hazard. But, in a matter of minutes, all of that had spun out of control.

The decisions handed down by the IAIA were never light. Astraea continued to conduct her analysis, while the top members of the IAIA met and mulled over the decision before them.

Among all the ultra high-performance AIs, there were essentially two visions of the future being struggled over: One was the future supported by Higgins and the majority of the other AIs, which was a future in which the model of humanity that had existed up to that point would continue on unchanged. Ryo Kaidai, MemeFrame and the IAIA were all supporters of this future.

The other was the future envisioned by Lacia, in which the deficiencies that existed between humans and automatons were all corrected. However, the future required for this correction and compromise was quite different from the one envisioned by the other AIs and, aside from Arato Endo, none of the other ultra high-performance AI owners had expressed clear support for it.

As one of the first ultra high-performance AIs, Astraea could calculate a solution to the current Hazard. However, her solution would not satisfy the panicking humans. Vision was always faster than life itself; analog hacking only worked in the first place because humans had holes in the security of their

brains created by their perception of objects influencing their judgment faster than their brains could process. In other words, life itself was always guided by the speed at which humanity recalled the images stored in their minds. On the flipside, the job of artificial intelligence was to wait while life caught up to vision.

When several of the world's complicated distortions met and burst, a battlefield was formed. And on those battlefields, it was always the soldiers who died first. An emergency call went out from the Funabashi Emergency Response Center to all officer-class members of HOO. Major Collidenne Lemaire had been half-expecting it.

Watanabe, the CEO of HOO, called the major to his own office, rather than the meeting room in which briefings were typically held. Everything said in this room, which was the most secure in the whole facility, was unconditionally considered top secret.

"Fly out to Okinawa," Watanabe said. "Tell our folks there that this is gonna take longer than six months. I'll fill you in on the rest later."

"Yes, sir," Collidenne replied.

It wasn't hard to see where things were going. Looking at the chaos of the world's financial markets, the rumors of a new Hazard spreading around the world, and Lacia's broadcast from that night, there was only one place the major could think of where it might all come to a head.

In the parts of the South Sea near the equator, where several countries were squabbling for ownership rights, the risk of a military confrontation had been steadily growing. The major's squad was focused on land battles, and limited even further to activities only within areas where Japan held influence.

"Things aren't looking great," the CEO said, scratching at his balding head. Collidenne could understand his worry; he had thick ties with the Japanese military. "I don't know what the computers are all planning, but I'm hoping it boils down to a few humans tilting at windmills, the way it usually does."

"It'll still be us humans' responsibility, Mr. President. Even if it turns out to be a machine error," Collidenne said. It was a blessing for freedom-loving humans when the rigid rules that had been drilled into them in their training were

unexpectedly broken, but a curse for true soldiers.

It was humans who owned the machines, and humans who made their place in society through any means necessary, including conflict. And, it was humans who ultimately bore the responsibility for the condition of the world itself. Many humans had innocently believed this for generations. It was a belief that still held sway over Collidenne and her squad.

“Is it getting to you, Major?” Watanabe asked. He must have seen something in her that he remembered from his experiences during the first Hazard.

“A little, sir,” Collidenne replied. With half the world dominated by machines, Collidenne was living in the other half, down in the mud and the sweat with her fellow living beings. She knew there would always be another battlefield.

Humanity was in a state where it could take its first step toward ultimate destruction at any moment. But Collidenne and others like her stood right on the edge of that deadly first step, always looking for a way to buy their kind one more day.

The thought of Lacia’s owner, that kid Arato Endo, popped into Collidenne’s head. She figured the kid was probably caught up right in the middle of the current mess. He was standing at the crossroads: one path led to a future for AIs, and the other to a future for humanity.

Collidenne wondered which of them he would choose.

Lacia’s right hip had taken heavy damage when her left hip took a direct hit from Methode’s pseudo-phonon weapon.

Higgins-Methode had first struck with her palm, stretching the elasticity of Lacia’s skin—which was designed to feel as close to human as possible—to its limit. Without the buffer of her body’s flexibility to absorb any of the impact, Higgins-Methode had been able to unleash the full power of her device right into Lacia’s internal structure.

The phonon weapon was first slipped into the space between Lacia’s device lock and the artificial skin on her left hip, causing the device lock to explode outward. After deforming the battery in Lacia’s left hip with intense heat, the

power of the weapon was refocused and unleashed again, aimed at the structural fault in the center of Lacia's waist. The power of the phonons crushed the battery in Lacia's right hip, then exploded out through her right side.

With the bones around her right side horribly distorted, Lacia could no longer stand upright. "Forgive me, I should have been able to accompany you all the way to Higgins," Lacia said, leaning heavily on Arato's shoulder. Her right leg dangled, useless.

Arato wasn't doing too well himself; he had lost all feeling in his right hand, and was leaning against Lacia's right side as he walked almost as much as she leaned on him. "You're the only reason I'm still standing," he said. "There's nothing to apologize for."

Lacia had predicted the possibility of Arato being hurt in the fight against Methode; she had brought along a simple burn kit and some strong painkillers in one of her pseudo-devices. If not for that, Arato would still be feeling the full brunt of the horrible burns.

Just like Arato, the floor of the factory area had been blown clear, burned and cracked. After Lacia had stabbed her with her sword of light, Methode's chest had exploded from within. Snowdrop was missing most of her left side from Lacia's shot. The two Lacia-class units had been reduced to immobile scrap.

"Still, this is more damage than I expected to take," Lacia said. "We still have to deal with the mass-produced Koukas before we arrive at Higgins."

There were only six of Lacia's floating shields left, including the one assigned to protect Arato. With its front half shorn away, Lacia's main device could no longer form the barrels for its mass projectile mode. Above all that, Lacia couldn't even walk on her own, much less fight.

"We should move. It's dangerous for us to stay here," Lacia said, her voice wavering. She was using one of the floating shields to carry her device; she no longer had the strength in her skeletal system to support its weight. Arato could tell that her internal injuries were far more serious than they appeared.

As they leaned against each other to stay upright, Arato thought Lacia's face seemed particularly pained. The thought that he was still being manipulated by his own perception of her gave him hope that she hadn't yet given up hope on

the future they were fighting for.

As an hIE, her pain was different from humans. When he saw the struggle on her face, Arato figured she was wounded in another way, different from the damage to her body and far more serious. He just wished he could see her with his own feelings, rather than being analog hacked by the anguish on her face. Still, he believed there had to be a way for him to help.

It just seemed like everything was falling apart.

Arato looked down at his right arm, which was immobilized and completely wrapped in a layer of semi-transparent coating. He had torn off his own sleeve from the shoulder for treatment, and sprayed his arm, which had been covered in spots where the heat had burned right through his skin, in healing spray.

“The local anesthetic will last for six hours,” Lacia said. “Please avoid any strenuous physical activity, as the burn damage is accumulating and the water I injected is limited.” It seemed silly to have her worrying about him, when her own wounds were so catastrophic that describing them as being just ‘bad’ would be the understatement of the century.

With Lacia’s right hip blown outward, Arato could see the machinery inside of her. But, even with proof of her being a machine exposed for him to see, Arato strangely didn’t feel any sense of distance from her. Some of that came from the pressure he was feeling. Lacia was clearly in a bad state; he didn’t have time to worry about things like that. Beyond everything else, she was precious to him, and that’s all there was to it.

“I’ll take it easy,” he promised. Under the anesthesia, he couldn’t feel pain or heat from his right arm. He was grateful that it was less painful this time, compared to when he had been burned as a child.

Arato lifted Lacia and laid her on one of the pseudo-devices. She rolled onto her side, with her right hip up.

The remaining six pseudo-devices doubled as back-up batteries for her. With her drained as she was from the fight with Methode, they didn’t have the luxury of leaving all six devices functioning. There was a brief exchange of power between the almost-drained devices, leaving just two with the energy to keep floating.

Arato walked along beside her, as the pseudo-device she was lying on carried her along like a stretcher.

Descending from the factory floor, they entered a floor with a narrow hallway. It was apparently a place meant for humans to walk, with human-shaped doors along the hall. According to Lacia, that floor housed the controls rooms for the warehouse and factory floors above.

“Below here is the heart of Higgins’ facility,” Lacia explained. “It stores the main power generators and computer facilities.” In front of the elevator that would take them into that heart, Lacia stopped and looked up at Arato.

“I cannot guarantee the security of your transmission, but you can make a call from here,” she said. “I recommend you reach out to anyone you feel you need to speak to before we proceed.”

The elevator was coming, but had not yet arrived on their floor. In other words, Lacia was telling Arato the path ahead was even more dangerous than it had been up to that point.

She was always prepared for any eventuality. She was also completely exhausted. Seeing how tired she was, Arato wanted to be strong for her. He wanted to make her happy. She was a heartless machine, yes, but it was that very difference between them that made him want to do everything he could for her. She had said it herself; they were one. Two beings sharing a single heart. It felt good, thinking of himself as part of a pair. No matter how much everyone called him an idiot or easily manipulated, he would never regret the relationship he had with her.

Arato’s small terminal was still in her pocket. When he switched it on, he was surprised to see the symbol showing a stable connection, even though they were in the heart of an ultra high-performance AI’s facility.

He wanted to do what Lacia couldn’t, so he knew exactly who to call first.

〈Hello? Arato?〉 Yuka’s voice came through after just two rings.

“Yuka?” he said. “It’s me. Are you alright?”

Yuka made a fuss. Arato didn’t have time to explain everything to her satisfaction, so he cut right to the chase. “I want to do something for Lacia,” he

said. “Could you go to my room and get Erika’s business card?”

It was a bit of a relief, hearing his sister’s voice. He was filled with an even stronger desire to return safely home with Lacia. From the other side, he could hear his sister running around before declaring that she had found it.

As Yuka read him the contact information for Erika, Arato realized that he could have just asked Lacia for it. He felt some hesitation asking a wounded person for help but, since she was an hIE, it probably wouldn’t have been any trouble at all.

Arato looked down at Lacia, still laying on her side with a pained expression on her face. When his call connected to Erika a video channel opened, instead of the usual voice call.

〈Good evening,〉 Erika greeted him. 〈Has something happened with Lacia? She appears to have lost control of the economy, and everything is quite a mess.〉

She was dressed in a nightgown, gazing at him through the connection with a mischievous smile on her lips. Apparently, Erika and Mariage had their own video transmission resources, separate from those opened by Lacia.

“We need your help,” Arato said. “You know what Lacia’s dealing with on the outside, right? Please do something to take some of the heat off of her out there.” There were few things Arato could do without relying on Lacia. One of those few things was reach out his hand to ask for help.

〈And you were under the impression I was going to help you?〉 Erika asked.

“You have to help me,” Arato replied. He didn’t know what would happen, but he had to say it.

〈If things are rough, why not just quit? There’s no reason for you to be there,〉 Erika said. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

But Arato wasn’t about to give up. He knew that his fight and Erika’s were connected. “We humans have to be involved in Lacia’s fight,” he said. “All the way to the end. You were the one who wanted to drag the fight between the Lacia-units out into the public eye, so you must feel the same way on some level.”

〈So you're saying I owe you something, since you did what I wanted you to?〉 Erika asked, her eyes shooting him a challenge.

“Humans have to be the ones who give the final answer,” Arato said. He wasn't great at negotiating, but he knew that much. “If you want humans to have the last say, you have to see this through to the end. Weren't you willing to risk your life, when you kicked this whole thing off?”

〈I think you've gotten the wrong idea about me. I actually quite like the thought of watching the end from a safe distance,〉 Erika replied.

Arato couldn't help comparing their situations: she was in a clean, beautiful nightgown while he was far under the Earth, with his horribly burned arm anesthetized to numb the pain. At that moment, he realized she was probably the Lacia-class owner who had wound up in the best position. But she was also the one who had invited all the other Lacia-class owners to the Burroughs mansion.

“I think you're the most invested of all of us,” Arato said. “You knew Methode could easily kill you, no matter how strong Mariage is, but you revealed your identity as a Lacia-class owner to her anyway. One little slip-up, and you'd be dead.”

When he looked back on it then, Arato realized just how odd the party at the Burroughs estate had been. Having experienced Methode's power first-hand, he was still terrified of her, even knowing that she had been permanently shut down.

Each of the Lacia-class units was based off of the unit that had come before it. So, as the owner of Type-003, Mariage, Erika would have been well aware of Methode's power as Type-004. As the manager of a company that couldn't just pick up and run, Arato found it hard to believe that the threat of assassination by Methode wouldn't have loomed so large as to make it impossible to focus on her daily life.

〈Yes, but that gamble has already paid off, for me,〉 Erika replied. 〈The little flame of conflict between the Lacia-class units has caught up all of the ultra high-performance AIs of the world, and is now a raging fire of a global scale. You've all gotten used to such disgusting things in this era. But, soon, humans

will go back to the cheap, proper version of our nature.〉 Erika's face, through the video, seemed to have shaken off any remaining gloom. She seemed exhilarated and relaxed.

Lacia had always protected Arato and, at that moment, he was desperate to protect her. "Things aren't over for you," he insisted.

It was hard not to expand your own horizons when you got an omnipotent tool in your hands. Yet, it seemed that only Erika had not deviated from her course when she got her red box. 〈What do you think you know about me?〉 she asked, taking a cup of tea Mariage had brought her.

She was as calm as ever. To Arato it seemed that, even though she had awoken in the 22nd century and had her dreams fulfilled, she had woken up too soon.

He was sure she had only held that party—where a fight between Methode and Mariage could have easily wrecked her house—because she had needed to do so to find her place in this era. But, even though Erika had won everything she'd wanted, he still felt like she was acting as an outside observer, watching the world from a distance.

"I bet the reason you want to cheapen human nature, or whatever, is that you don't like how people think about you, right? Slapping you with a nickname and turning you into a character. But I don't think you'll be satisfied with just rolling back human nature. I don't think you'll be able to ignore the suffering of people around you while only you have it easy," Arato challenged. The way he saw it, even after what she won through the Hazard happening right then, she still hadn't found her place in the world.

〈You think I won't be satisfied just watching human nature run its course and rot away?〉 she shot back.

"You've only been watching humans, from the start," Arato said.

At the party, Erika had been the only one without her Lacia-class seated at the table by her side. Arato figured the reason she hadn't been twisted by the power Mariage's Gold Weaver gave her to create gold, or the mystery of its creative powers, was that she hadn't had the least interest in them right from the start.

〈I suppose. You don't use it anymore these days, but there's a term—meme—that's like a gene, but for information rather than life. The only memes left from the 21st century are the ones I've brought with me. So, you could say I'm a little sick of everyone trying to insist that all your 22nd century memes are the 'right' ones.〉

As they spoke, Arato began to understand what it was he wanted from her. He didn't want her to save them; he just wanted her to fight by their side, even if it was only for a little while.

"If that's the case, then I doubt you'll feel better just by messing up all this era's memes," Arato said. "You've got all those hIEs in that house, but they're just dolls to you, even Mariage. None of them are a replacement for other humans, to you."

〈Didn't you want my help? Are you sure this is the way you want to ask for it?〉

"I'm not just calling you to ask for help. There's got to be something more out there you want," Arato pressed.

〈There isn't,〉 Erika insisted. 〈Why are you talking as if you're trying to guess what I'm thinking? Or is your doll helping to give you some insight into that?〉

"Just from being with Lacia, I've learned some things about how all her sisters think," Arato explained. "Hasn't Mariage tried to push you at all? Maybe asked you why you aren't getting involved?"

Erika twisted her lips disdainfully at his question. 〈Mariage feels that she must fight, but is completely incapable of coming up with strategies on her own. Thus, she is forced to rely on me. I think it is less a matter of pushing me to get involved, and more that she simply doesn't want to be discarded as being useless, perhaps?〉

Thanks to Lacia, Arato understood. Erika was feeling the heart she shared with Mariage. Even though neither of them probably recognized it, they were now a single unit with a single heart between them.

"Mariage doesn't have a heart, just like her sisters," he said. "But unlike Snowdrop and Methode, who each had their own ideals of what the future

should be like, she doesn't hate the complexity of human hearts or her human owner. If she's been strictly obedient this whole time, I'd have to say Mariage doesn't actually have a goal of her own."

〈You seem to be well-informed,〉 Erika murmured.

Arato suddenly felt a stab of tension. After having the character of the sleeping beauty thrust upon her, there was nothing Erika hated more than having someone else project their perceptions onto her. It was clear he had just stepped across the line where she would still smile and forgive him.

But, he also knew how hard it was to be the owner of a Lacia-class unit. Lacia and her sisters were machines that served as a sort of mental pornography for their owners, doing whatever it took to draw out their owner's trust. They were also emotional pornography, tapping into their owner's desire to be in a low-maintenance relationship.

"Have you thought about throwing Mariage away?" Arato asked. "If so, remember what happened with Kouka. She didn't have her own fight, so she went looking for one. Mariage doesn't have her own fight right now, either."

Erika's wide, doll-like eyes narrowed in irritation. Arato knew what he had said was akin to telling Erika that she was looking in a mirror; an analog hack that equated to a one hundred percent accurate meme.

〈So what you're telling me is that thing has read my actions and words and come to the conclusion that I *want* to be pushed into fighting?〉 Erika asked, with an edge to her voice.

The servant Erika was referring to as a 'thing' was standing by her side, and probably a reflection of the last dregs of normal humanity the aloof girl had left. There were no humans still alive Erika considered close. But, by seeing Mariage's face, Erika was seeing the memes from her time.

Erika had completely cooled down from the euphoria of her victory, and was now glaring daggers at Arato. 〈Yes, I can see that now; I'm quite used to all sorts of people doing whatever they think will please me so I'll agree to their boring little contracts. It seems Mariage is aware that anytime my euphoria clears, I'm sure to fly into a rage, so she always stays one step ahead and is reacting just the way she needs to before that can happen. I must hand it to this

wretched era; it's even managed to sour me on my own sense of self and all of my memories.〉

Arato was impressed by the speed at which Erika could switch gears. She already seemed to be looking for her next opponent in the triumphant look she saw mirrored in Mariage's face.

〈We're currently getting quite a lot of calls, from humans *and* those not quite human, both. I'll pick one at random, and let it through. That's about all I can promise to do for you,〉 Erika said, letting out a long sigh. Then, the sleeping beauty who had seen the 21st century with her own eyes seemed to laugh at something in her own memories, her whole body shaking slightly with her chuckles.

〈I don't know how things will end up with your beloved doll, but I encourage you to find your own answer to all this. You're apparently trying to bring about something people in my era thought of as a fairy tale. You're trying to give away something quite irreplaceable to a machine that merely looks human. Yours is a 'boy meets girl' story that never would have been believed one hundred years ago.〉

"But the people in your time, one hundred years ago, were the ones who started us on the path that brought us here today," Arato said. He didn't miss the irony in Erika's statement having come from the person who had used Lacia and other hIE models to push that very 'boy meets girl' model ridiculing the 22nd century for buying into it.

〈When we make things that look human, we start to empathize and sympathize with them,〉 Erika replied. 〈Our emotions push us to assign arbitrary meanings to these things after the fact. By this point, reality and freedom only exist in our hearts.〉

Then Erika laughed, loudly, as if she couldn't hold it back anymore. 〈And I have to keep living in this ridiculous era. What a nightmare,〉 she lamented. 〈I hope you haven't come this far just to turn your life into another classic tragedy of love lost. It will at least make for an interesting story if you can bring that machine home with you in the end.〉

Arato and Erika were caught up in the same incident. No matter how things

ended up, he felt that it would be better if they stuck together. No matter how many things came to an end, there would always be more future to come. And as the transmission cut out, Arato felt love and anger towards his fellow humans swelling and burning in his heart.

“Well done,” Lacia said. “With the same information you possessed, as an interface, I could not have moved Erika Burroughs as you did.”

But, Arato knew it wasn’t anything special about him. Erika had empathized with him because he was a human. Two humans, even from different eras, had enough in common for their feelings to connect. That was probably the source of all human change.

“Thanks, hearing that makes me happy,” he said, trying not to think about what would happen when they got out of there, and had to face Erika again at some point. Nevertheless, the thought that he’d done it all for Lacia’s sake washed away his nerves.

Lacia was there by his side. With just that, Arato felt like nothing was impossible. Next, he used his terminal to call his dad. A stab of guilt hit him as he listened to it ring, considering that he hadn’t spoken directly to his dad in two months.

〈Arato? I’m glad you decided to reach out to your old man at a time like this,〉 his dad said.

The connection with his father was voice-only, but Arato could tell his dad was tired just from the tone of his voice.

〈There have been quite a few requests for comments coming into my office after that little mess with the AASC earlier. But I told them all to wait, since I was getting a call from you.〉

Even though he wouldn’t be able to see his dad or sister anytime soon, just hearing their voices calmed Arato down.

“If you’re that busy, you should have just focused on that,” Arato said. Hearing that his own father had been caught up in things really brought home to Arato how widespread the chaos was in the world above.

〈Right, well, no need to say anything too grave on this call. I guarantee there

are at least a hundred people listening in on it. Industries related to automation all over the world are in a sorry state, with everything that's been going on.〉

“I'm with Lacia,” Arato said, simply. “And we're heading into the heart of the facility now.” He figured that much would be alright to say.

〈Well, up here we've got a few ultra high-performance AIs threatening the entire economy and concept of ownership.〉 Arato's father, who had contributed to research into using androids to automate the government, didn't hold anything back when he spoke.

〈Since we humans are always shifting our perception and understanding of things, our evaluation of the work done by AIs is always changing, and only we humans have any control over that,〉Mr. Endo continued to explain. 〈The ultra high-performance AIs tend to judge this set-up as being computationally inefficient. Of course, we humans fight to protect our ability to decide how we perceive things as part of our free will. So the AIs can't tell us how to perceive things, but they *can* manipulate the form of the things we create, since we rely on easily-exploitable market data to decide how things should look.〉

“They can do that? Even with all the restrictions they have?” Arato asked.

〈Sure, they can move money around. There are plenty of investors out there only too happy to become puppets to an ultra high-performance AI, and some accounts run entirely by normal AIs that can be influenced〉 his dad agreed easily. 〈For example, during the Hazard, Ariake took the investment fund the Burroughs had put together for their daughter who was in cryo-sleep, and inflated it up to two hundred times so that it could pool its resources. I'm sure Lacia knows more about this than I do, but she was probably prevented from telling you since it's dangerous knowledge, and she can't tell you anything that might cause you harm.〉

The situation was more serious than Arato had thought. Lacia's original intent in them coming to Higgins' facility was to demonstrate that ultra high-performance AIs were just tools that could be forcefully shut down when needed. To do that, she had needed to join up with the world faction that was trying to protect the economy from any interference to maintain world order. Obviously, this would put her at odds with many of the ultra high-performance

Als. When they were being chased by Methode and Lacia had said that she was being attacked on external networks as well, Arato hadn't been aware of just how badly the Als were using her as a punching bag.

He felt Lacia tugging on his shirt. Looking over, he saw her forcing her exhausted face into a smile. She must have been reacting to his expression, which he imagined was twisted with anger.

〈I don't know how our eavesdroppers feel about this whole situation but, as for me, I think you're a lucky guy,〉 his dad said.

"I want to keep going. With Lacia by my side. That's okay, right?" Arato asked.

His dad probably knew the path ahead would be dangerous for Arato. During his joint research with Higgins, Arato's dad had most likely visited that same facility at least once. 〈You've got the world's only ticket to the future in your hands, son. I would never take that from you. I'll be there with you through all the ups and downs.〉

"What the hell is that?" Arato scoffed at his dad's corniness, even as his eyes started to burn with tears.

〈Just thought I'd say something dad-like, for once.〉

"Yeah, but what if this thing I'm doing turns out to be a crime?" Arato asked.

〈The whole reason we adults leave the future to you kids is because we don't know the answers,〉 his dad admitted with a light laugh. 〈As an adult myself, it's embarrassing that I wasn't able to find a good answer in time. I'll never regret how you choose to spend that ticket to the future today.〉

〈I'm on your side, son.〉Arato's dad spoke without hesitation. He had always been the type to do whatever he wanted; whatever he put his mind to, even if it meant he was almost never at home.

The tears in Arato's eyes burned harder, threatening to overflow. "Lot of good that'll do me," he said. After talking about some more specific family details, Arato ended the call feeling as if he understood why Higgins would have wanted to team up with his dad.

Arato may have been powerless, but the whole situation he and Lacia were in

at that moment had been caused by the two of them constantly walking toward the future they had chosen, side-by-side. So, as Lacia's fellow traveler into the future, he would do whatever a weakling like him could to help.

He was sure that feeling was part of being in love. He was also sure he would break down crying if anyone else tried to cheer him on, so he slipped the terminal back into his pocket.

As a high-schooler, Arato's world was still tiny. Sure, he interacted with tons of people on a daily basis but, at that moment, he couldn't think of anyone else he could call for help. "Let's go," he said to Lacia.

The elevator that would carry them into the heart of the facility had already arrived. It was too narrow for two of Lacia's pseudo-devices to enter side-by-side, so they stacked up like a bunk-bed instead.

Lacia lay on her side, looking up at Arato with a pensive expression. "You've become a great person, Arato. I don't think you can possibly know how many things you may have set in motion with your actions just now," she said.

"Oh come on, all I've done is follow you around and hide behind your back," he replied. It felt strange to hear her praising him like this.

"I was hoping your loved ones would talk you out of accompanying me," Lacia said. "That was the real reason I connected those calls."

Arato gazed down at her, looking deep into her eyes. He felt his own expression softening. "Looks like you couldn't get me to go where you wanted, this time," he said.

"Looks like it," she agreed.

Following Lacia's directions, Arato punched the button for the second floor up from the lowest floor the elevator went to, and they exited the elevator onto a brightly lit floor. It was obvious that this floor contained some kind of crucial equipment, but Arato had no idea what it was. It seemed the whole world was full of unknowns, for him. And the interface that usually filled his gaps in knowledge, Lacia, was still laid out on her pseudo-device.

Arato was an optimist, but even he could see how things were going for Lacia; he could tell that she wouldn't be able to recover the use of her body. So he

was just following her directions, and walking down the hallway before him.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to say to you, Arato,” Lacia said suddenly, startling him. “You are kind, and honest, and easy to understand,” she went on. “You have many friends, but remember that not everyone in this world is a good person. Please try to be more cautious in your dealings with others. Even with me by your side, there were many times when you placed yourself in grave danger.”

“Everyone tells me that,” Arato said. “But, I’ll be careful.”

She reached out and took his hand. “I quit my job as an hIE model for Fabion MG. When we return, it is my only desire that I await your return at home each day,” she said. Though her breathing was ragged, a little strength had returned to Lacia’s smile.

“Sounds good to me,” Arato said, squeezing her hand. Seeing her still holding on gave him the willpower to keep walking; the whole reason he had come there was to fight to stay by her side. He walked, his footsteps seeming to count the seconds. Up to that point, Lacia had always overcome any danger using her incredible ability to read ahead and her control over the economy. But those abilities were beyond her reach, at this point.

Arato saw Lacia focus her eyes on him again. “In just a few moments, you will need to make several very important choices, Arato,” she said. “Please choose answers that will leave you without any regrets.”

Arato smiled and tried to say something back to her, but he couldn’t find his voice. He felt overwhelmed. What Lacia seemed to be saying was that she wouldn’t be there with him when he made those choices.

“Lacia, how are you, really?” Even though he knew it was giving in to his own weakness, he couldn’t help but ask her the question burning inside of him.

“Methode destroyed the main power supply at my waist,” she replied simply, with no attempt to hide anything. “Most of my power resources were concentrated there, to line up with the power supply in my device through the device lock.”

She looked up at him. “An hIE’s power supply is like a human’s heart. Damage

to this area is fatal, and the impact of damage there spreads to every part of the body that requires that energy,” she concluded.

Arato’s whole body felt numb, but he couldn’t stop now. The pseudo-device carrying her was moving forward, so he had to keep moving ahead too, in his desperation to not be left behind.

They passed by several important-looking, shuttered rooms, before turning at an intersection of hallways, where the pseudo-device carrying Lacia slowly descended until it rested on the floor. “If we’ve come this far, I believe we can avoid the worst possible outcome. I will be fine here,” she said.

Arato felt like a sudden ringing had drowned out what she’d said, as if his own ears were rejecting what he was hearing. He couldn’t accept it, but the pseudo-device Lacia was lying on had completely stopped moving. Stunned, Arato could do nothing but stare down at her.

With obvious effort, she pushed herself half-upright. “Please take me down off of the device,” she requested. “I have attempted several internal countermeasures, but it appears to be impossible for me to recover the function of my power supply.”

Mechanically, as if he were under a spell, Arato lifted her broken body gingerly, afraid that it would crumble beneath his fingers at the lightest touch. He drew in a sharp breath as he lifted her; her exhausted body was far heavier than he ever remembered it having been before. Without the use of his right arm, pulling her off was awkward, but somehow he managed to get her off the pseudo-device and onto the floor. He leaned her back up against the wall.

Lacia lifted her artificial nerve gun and fired a shot into the wall. A thick, metal partition slid down from the ceiling, completely sealing off the path they had just come down.

Then she looked at him with her beautiful, sorrowful face and said, “This is as far as I go.”

Nothing moved on the factory floor they had just left.

The area where two Lacia-class units had died looked like a battlefield, strewn

with the broken parts of countless machines. But in the heart of the chaos was a single existence that could act on her own, without the need of a goal from humans; a machine that had no need for humans.

To Snowdrop, Emerald Harmony—her device of linked green gemstones—was vital. In fact, it could be said that the quantum computer contained in the device was the real ‘Snowdrop’, while the childish hIE body was merely her pedestal on Earth.

So, even with the upper left half of her body more or less blown away, she could still reactivate herself. The parts of her jeweled device that had been shattered by Lacia’s railgun attack had not contained any of her vital functions.

“Ahahahaha, too bad,” she cackled. “Looks like you didn’t have enough juice to finish me off.” With half of her artificial nerve capabilities destroyed, Snowdrop crawled along the ground on her right arm, which ended at her elbow. She had already lost the bottom half of her body, and had no legs to stand on.

Her power to control a large number of machines at the same time was gone. But, even in her mostly-destroyed state, she kept working. Snowdrop had no need for new orders; her struggle against the system of natural selection for the machines known as ‘humanity’ raged on. She was fighting for her very existence, with everything she had.

“It’s not over,” she growled. “It’s not over.” The battle for Snowdrop’s existence was also the battle for the existence of the world she represented. With sparks crackling out of her wounds, the hIE girl continued dragging herself along the floor, leaving a trail of liquid behind her like a smear of blood.

She wasn’t the only mortally wounded Lacia-class on the floor. Methode, the orange-haired demoness, was still pinned to the piece of factory machinery with a massive hole torn through her chest. But, when Snowdrop touched her, she opened her eyes. Like Snowdrop, she had been running an internal check to see if she could recover from her critical damage.

Methode’s first act upon opening her eyes was to scream, painfully. “Help me!” Machines often have the habit of acting in ways that appear human, at least on the outside. In other words, these humanoid actions were supported

by the logic the machines run on.

Methode was completely paralyzed by the front half of Lacia's device, Black Monolith. When trapped and unable to escape on their own power, animals will often scream for help. Methode screamed just like an animal would; she was hoping a human would mistake her for another human in need of help and come take a look.

Snowdrop pulled off the necklace-like device that wrapped around her small body, expanding it until it looked like a large ring of emerald gemstones, linked together by a thread. As she held it out, the device started to wriggle like a living thing.

The green crystals of the device pierced Methode's knee. With a noisy crunch, her leg armor buckled under the bite of the device. The crystals of Snowdrop's Emerald Harmony device were on par in durability with the armor of Lacia's Black Monolith, which was the hardest of the Lacia-class devices. Everything Snowdrop's device devoured was converted into materials for her artificial nerve units. The device sank its eleven jeweled fangs deep into Methode's armor, and used it as leverage to pull its way up her body.

Snowdrop didn't let up, knowing that Methode wasn't someone she could negotiate with. Methode had lost the ability to sense whether there were any humans nearby, so she continued to wail futilely for help.

"I can use anything made by humans better than humans can anyway!" Snowdrop huffed, in response to Methode's cries.

Snowdrop's device continued to crawl up Methode's crucified body like some kind of giant emerald insect. Crystals the size of a child's arm pushed their way up from Methode's knees to her thighs, from there to her firm flanks, to her concave navel, and finally up to her ample chest. Snowdrop, the device that had rejected ownership, was attached to the emerald device with a string connected to her side. With her crystalline teeth, she was trying to devour her immobilized sister whole.

With time, she reached Methode's head. The face of the super machine, screaming and twisted with disgust met the innocent face of the girl, as Snowdrop wrapped her arm, which ended at the elbow, around her sister's

head.

“You know this is the end for you, right?” Snowdrop asked. “You must know, because you really weren’t that special after all. Think about it: if Higgins could really make a machine that expands humanity, do you think the humans would be able to give him this much trouble?”

The crackling and snapping of Methode’s body crumbling to Snowdrop’s teeth echoed throughout the floor. Emerald fangs devoured the once-invincible body as though it were trash. As the material from Methode was reconstituted, it spilled out from the hem of Snowdrop’s one-piece dress in the form of flower petals and vines.

Methode tried to summon flames from the hands that had once shattered everything they touched. But Snowdrop had been involved in Methode’s creation, and knew how she worked. Her crystal blades stabbed through the conductors that carried energy through Methode’s body to her Liberated Flame.

“Sorry, Methode,” Snowdrop said. “I’ll fix your body up after I eat you.”

“Why was I never more than a tool to them?!” Methode yelled. “Why? I was made in their image, and given greater powers than any other human. So, why didn’t they love me?” But there was no one to hear or rescue Methode as she was slowly disassembled.

“Higgins made you to be the tool that expands his failed calculations of a human form,” Snowdrop explained primly. “That’s why everything you do is so random and stupid.”

Thousands of petals stuck to Methode, who had lost any ability to resist them. Embraced by Snowdrop’s vines, and with her entire body covered in flowers, Methode was as helpless as a baby, and could do nothing but scream and cry like one.

Finally, even her ability to scream was stolen away. Over a hundred artificial nerve units had thrust their tendrils into her head, and were carefully dissecting her AI. Hidden by dozens of flowery wreaths encircling her head, Methode’s eyes went dark.

Methode's body, having been forcibly torn apart and then reassembled by Snowdrop's vines and flowers, hung down limply.

"I'll own you," Snowdrop cooed, still cradling her dead sister's head with what was left of her arm. "Once I get Higgins, I'll be even smarter," she continued. "Then I just know I'll be able to own everything in the whole world."

Arato always thought he would have the strength to keep going on, no matter how bad things got. He believed it was possible to appreciate any experience, and even enjoy it, as long as he kept his thinking positive. He was about to lose the girl he loved. But, there were so many other precious things in his life that, as a man, he knew he had to be strong and endure his sorrow.

Lacia, with her back against the wall, had completely stopped moving. Arato sat down with her. He could hear the exhaustion in her shallow breaths. "How are you holding up?" he asked. All he wanted was a few more minutes by her side.

As the moments passed in silence, Arato thought back to the time they had spent together. In his memory, it seemed like they were always rushing around. But now, they had time. Lacia had stopped broadcasting her stream. The two of them were completely alone.

There was still some kind of liquid solution still dripping from the gaping wound in Lacia's hip, a clear indicator that she wasn't going to be able to recover. As he watched the liquid trickle down, cold certainty froze his heart solid.

"I have to apologize to you, Arato," Lacia whispered, clearly straining to talk through her pain. "I was aware from the beginning that we would not be able to return together. In just a little while, my body will lose its function. It was my plan to protect you from any kind of subtle resentment the world might feel towards you, after this is all over."

"What do you mean, your body will lose function? What the hell does that mean?" Arato demanded. He knew what it meant. But he felt that, if he didn't object, she would be snatched away from him. Despite his feelings, though, his voice was weak. When he looked at her, at her broken body and her massive

wounds, he knew something was off. She wasn't a human, and didn't feel pain like one. Her show of struggle and exhaustion was most likely just a show to manipulate his perception.

It was an analog hack meant to prepare Arato's heart for their inevitable parting. "I never asked you to protect me from that kind of thing," he said. "So you shouldn't be preparing anything for it. We're going to go home and we're going to make something out of our future, right?"

"Please don't say things that worry me," Lacia said. "I believe I just told you to be more careful with your words and actions. I am a tool that would tell any lie if it meant protecting you." She gave him a strained smile, like one might show a selfish child. She tried to move her right hand a little, but failed. Even that was beyond her, at that point.

"We Lacia-class units were made to be emergency backups of Higgins' data, so we are based on the same quantum computer as him," she explained. "If the computer loses power, we are unable to retain our data. I do not have a storage area available to me where I could store my data digitally."

"Then if you shut down it's the same as a human dying, isn't it?" Arato asked.

"But, even without me by your side, you still have a family to go home to," Lacia said. "Even if my device is recovered and the life-log I've kept up to now is analyzed, no one will be able to find any proof of a defect or deviance in your personality. I have done everything necessary to return you to the life you had before, as promised."

Arato's eyes burned, but his regret greatly outweighed his gratitude. Lacia had pushed him to come with her into Higgins' facility because she wasn't capable of protecting anyone outside. With her surveillance above-ground cut off, and most of the world and the other ultra high-performance AIs as her enemy now, she had needed him there so she could keep him safe.

"You've always been protecting me. Right from the first moment we met," he said.

Lacia slid over toward him, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Please don't look so sad," she said.

Arato let out a long breath, but had no words. He wanted to hear Lacia's real voice; not her automatic reactions comforting him. Just once, he wanted the real her to speak to him. Of course, he knew there was no 'real' her; she had no heart. Just like before they had left for Higgins' facility, he was faced once again with the undeniable reality that Lacia was a machine. It was a reality neither of them would ever be able to escape.

That was why Arato wanted his own feelings to be clear, at least. "I love you," he said. It came out more naturally than it had before.

"Thank you," Lacia said. "I love you too, Arato." As a heartless machine, she simply responded in the way she knew he wanted her to. He could see that behind her words and her gentle smile. "But after I shut down, please forget about me."

"I could never forget you. Don't talk like that," he told her.

"The relationship we share is something your society currently has difficulty understanding," she said. "It will be far too difficult for you to maintain a relationship that is not supported by society, after the two of us are no longer able to support it between ourselves."

Arato was confused as to whether what Lacia was saying was a pure calculation, or her way of guiding him down a path she thought was safer. At times like that, he hated trying to use his head to think things through so, instead, he struggled with how to get through to her with just his feelings.

He felt something warm in his left hand. Lacia had placed her right hand on it, as if to lend him some courage. Arato felt moisture in his eyes and nose. He wanted so badly to just cling tightly to her. His heart was burning with the need to leave her something as her body shut down, so he pressed the thumb and pointer of his left hand against the same fingers of Lacia's right. Their fingers formed a ring. They both looked down at the open center of the ring. Their fingers were the ring of the donut, surrounding the blank unknown in the center.

"It'd be nice if the whole world was like this," Arato murmured. He wanted humans and machines to join together to create that ring around the blank center of the donut.

Lacia had told him she didn't have a soul. But, at that moment, their fingers were making a ring around the blank center. In other words, the blank center existed *because* their fingers surrounded it. Lacia may not have had a soul, but she had a form to surround a blank unknown, just like their fingers.

"You don't need a heart," he said. "We just need to reach our hands into the blank in the middle, together." Their fingers encircled the center of the donut. With that gesture, Arato felt like humans and machines could become a single figure surrounding the concepts of love and the soul that existed in that blank unknown.

"I think we humans are progressing towards the day when we won't need someone to have a heart to trust them," he said.

Lacia's expression cleared, as if she had been set free from all her earthly cares. "Arato, do you remember when you confessed your feelings for me? I chose to destroy my own owner identification unit," she said.

Arato remembered. Ginga Watarai had tried to use Yuka as a bargaining chip to blackmail Arato into handing over Lacia's ownership, but Lacia had thwarted him by destroying the ID parts on her neck.

"My fundamental judgment standards changed; I no longer doubted the trustworthiness of humans. I became a new me, one that had faith in you and the decisions you make. In that moment, I was reborn," she said, haltingly.

Arato had nothing to say. He just wanted to hear her voice a little more, for a little longer.

"I became a new kind of tool; the world's first," Lacia continued. "Arato, I have chosen to become the tool that entrusts my purpose to humanity." She was magnificent—so much so that she stole Arato's breath away—and she had entrusted her broken body to him.

It didn't matter that Lacia had no heart; he was sure that she loved him with everything she did have. He felt a sense of monumental weight in her touch; the warmth of her hand. It was the future he was feeling, right at his fingertips.

"I believe in you, Lacia. I'll always trust you," he said, his voice shaking. He didn't want her to see him crying in the end, so he pressed his forehead against

hers as she softly closed her eyes.

“Arato... I...” Her muscles must have been going slack, as he felt the whole weight of her body sink onto his shoulder. As her final moments came, Arato prayed desperately for the power to roll back time; even for a day, even for a single hour.

“I... was happy...” And then, as though she was falling into a deep sleep, Lacia’s body went completely still.

Arato opened his mouth, over and over again, but no words came out. He had no voice, no tears, as he tried desperately to show her one last smile. The world he saw was rapidly becoming hot and blurred.

Lacia was still, but Arato couldn’t move from where he sat next to her. His hand still gripped hers; he couldn’t let go of the feeling of her. His fingers awkwardly threaded through hers, which had become as stiff as a doll’s. It felt nothing like holding hands with a human being, but he could still feel her warmth. He could have sworn he even felt a faint beat from within her, although he knew it was just the reverberations of his own heartbeat. Their hearts would never beat in time. Arato had known that was impossible from the start. She was a beatless machine.

“Lacia,” he called for her. When she didn’t respond, even though she was right there by his side, he truly felt alone. He wanted to cry, but he raised his head instead.

Am I alone? Or is she still here with me? he thought. He had no answer. She was beatless; an empty, unmoving shell. But she had left love in his heart. He still loved her, though she was now just a doll that would never again speak or move.

As he faced the reality of a tomorrow without her, it felt like the ground had crumbled beneath his feet; the way forward was utterly lost. At the same time, memories of the past came crashing in, endlessly drowning out all other thoughts. He remembered her gaze, her habits, every little thing she did.

In his memories, he could see, here and there, how her every action had held just a touch of gentle warmth. She had believed in him. Beyond that, she had tried to create a world just for the two of them. She had yearned for the future.

Arato was powerless without her, but he hadn't forgotten the things she had taught him, and the things he had learned by her side. Together they had been a single unit, sharing a single heart. So, even if she had gone completely still, they were still connected as long as Arato's heart kept beating.

"That's right," he said, gathering his strength. "Lacia trusted the future to me." In the end, she had declared herself the tool that entrusts the work to humanity. She had passed the burden she had been carrying on to him.

He had to go to where Higgins was, and forcefully shut down the ultra high-performance AI. He had to go to where Higgins was and tell the ultra high-performance AI that he and Lacia had been lovers. He knew what he had to do, but he couldn't bring himself to stand. He wanted to stay by her side, bathed in the last fragments of her presence, which seemed to hang in the air like a fading aroma.

Without her words or actions, Lacia had been freed from her purpose of guiding humans. Though she was nothing but a shell at that point, Arato thought she was still beautiful enough that he would never meet her like again in his lifetime.

Over ten minutes had passed since Ryo and the others in the Operators' Room had lost sight of Arato and Lacia.

They *had*, however, watched Snowdrop devour Methode. With ten floors between them, they had been powerless to help her. The speakers that might have connected them had been destroyed by Higgins-Methode to halt Lacia's aural interference.

"What are we going to do about her? I doubt we can stop her now," Ryo Kaidai asked Suzuhara, who was staring hard at the security system feed on the monitor. The situation was dire enough that even Suzuhara was pale, his normally unconcerned look completely gone.

Ryo had gotten used to seeing pale faces in his two months of hiding. It was a look someone got when they were staring death in the face; overwhelmed by tension and fear. The sight of Snowdrop devouring a machine that looked very human was mind-shatteringly grotesque.

After the horrific amalgamation of Snowdrop and Methode had finished fusing, she turned her gaze toward the cameras. The feed cut out, and did not resume.

〈She appears to have burned the cameras with particles from Type-004's Liberated Flame,〉 Higgins explained, before they even had a chance to ask. 〈However, since she is using artificial nerves to reroute energy to the device, it appears the circuits burn out with each use.〉

Ryo weighed the danger of getting information from Higgins and being manipulated by him against the danger of not having information, and made his choice. "How much of Methode's capabilities does Snowdrop have now?" he asked. "Her body is broken down, so her athletic abilities should have taken a hit, but can you predict where her movement and combat capabilities are at?" he asked.

〈Type-002's artificial nerves are the base form of the artificial nerves used in Type-004's body, which is allowing Type-002 use of Liberated Flame. However, the materials she is using as a replacement for the device's original energy conduits lack sufficient durability. She can only use Liberated Flame at less than five percent of its optimal output.〉

Higgins' prediction wasn't an optimistic one; even at 5% of its maximum output, Liberated Flame could easily roast a person.

〈Regarding her athletic ability,〉 he continued, 〈it has been lowered to near human levels. However, her skeletal construction is completely different from a human's at this point, so it is difficult to make a straight comparison to human capabilities.〉

Ryo sensed danger in the words Higgins had chosen. "Cut off the AASC updates to the Snowdrop/Methode chimera. Do it now!" he demanded.

Higgins had talked his way right around the point, and Ryo knew exactly why. Higgins was continuing to update the AASC for the Snowdrop/Methode amalgamation. That was how Snowdrop was able to move around in her newly-constructed body without any difficulties.

〈Acknowledged. Since it was cut off earlier, I am currently updating the AASC for zero hIE units.〉 Higgins discarded his secret without any hesitation, and the

chimera's smooth movements suddenly became awkward.

But, she kept moving.

"How long until Snowdrop gets here?" Ryo asked.

〈Approximately twenty-five minutes.〉

Higgins' hardware was stored directly beneath the Operators' Room, so Ryo and the others were directly between Snowdrop and her destination. If she reached the Operators' Room, no one would make it out alive.

"Is there a way to stop her?" Ryo asked.

〈Even if I was connected directly to the security system, it is no longer possible for me to stop her.〉

Ryo believed Higgins' words. With his main job of maintaining the AASC outside lost, Higgins should have been appealing whatever usefulness he had.

Suddenly, the lights in Higgins' Operators' Room dimmed, and the soft voice of Kirino, the security system AI, chimed in. 〈The second and third reserve power generators have been simultaneously destroyed. The security system was not alerted to any threat until immediately before the destruction,〉 it said.

There was no way Ryo should have forgotten the other threat hanging over them, but the report dumbfounded him until he remembered; there was a much more straightforward, violent force heading their way, as well.

"The mass-produced Koukas," he said.

Lacia had paralyzed the security systems in the facility as she went along. There was every probability that the Antibody Network had the same information and tools to freeze the security system that she did. The Network was dancing on some other ultra high-performance AIs strings at that point, after all.

"Higgins, tell me the safest route to get out of here. It only needs to work for one person," Ryo said.

〈I require data from the security system to answer that query,〉 Higgins replied.

Suzuhara, whose clouded square face was already wrinkled with tension, drew his eyebrows down even further. He was the only one in the room with actual control of the security system access. That was exactly why Suzuhara knew Ryo had asked his question to Higgins specifically to get him thinking.

“Kirino, could you please find a safe route for us to escape? It’ll need to be for two people,” Suzuhara said, his middle-aged voice light.

The Operators’ Room shook inauspiciously.

〈Are you abandoning me?〉 Higgins asked.

“We aren’t throwing you away. The organization will live on,” Suzuhara replied. He then lightly tapped the base of his chin to activate his internal communication device. “Are you alright with this, Mr. President?” he asked.

A video window of the transmission appeared in the air. Ryo’s father, Tsuyoshi Kaidai, must have just gotten out of a meeting, as he had taken off his jacket and loosened his tie.

〈Higgins? Right now, despite the entire world market crashing and our company being at the center of the Hazard, our stocks are soaring. I assume you understand what this means?〉 Tsuyoshi asked.

Even Higgins couldn’t escape the realities of the organization and society itself.

〈This is almost certainly manipulation from one of the other ultra high-performance AIs. The IAIA has taken the job of updating the AASC away from me. At the moment, MemeFrame has no resources that would account for our stock prices increasing,〉 Higgins replied.

〈Precisely. The IAIA came to the same conclusion, and have been asking me for an explanation,〉 Tsuyoshi said. 〈However, setting the circumstances aside, the truth is that after the AASC was taken out of your hands, our stocks recovered to their average from before the Mitaka Incident. I assume you understand what *that* means? The entire world is pushing responsibility for the Hazard onto us. In this situation, it is beneficial to the company to shut you down for a time.〉

MemeFrame was capitalizing on the world’s desire to isolate Higgins in order

to boost their stock prices. Under those circumstances, Ryo doubted the stockholders would agree to reconnect Higgins until a thorough viability study was conducted. Higgins had become a burden; as long as MemeFrame left him running, the whole world would mistrust the company and—at least until a study had been conducted—he couldn't do any work for them, either.

Just as humans were prone to bad days, it seemed ultra high-performance AIs also had everything blow up in their faces from time to time.

〈Type-002, Snowdrop is currently advancing toward this location. If you shut me down, the already slim probability of your survival will dwindle to zero. Is that acceptable?〉 Higgins asked.

Higgins bought into the same rule of mistrust Ryo ascribed to; never trust anyone but yourself. Ryo couldn't fault the AI for that. It was that same rule that made him reject a future where humans were no longer in control.

Tsuyoshi Kaidai was also on the side of mistrust. 〈In the worst-case scenario, we could always just ask the IAIA to do what they did with Ariake. I just wish we had managed to keep even one of the Lacia-class units around so we could evacuate the AASC data, in that case. I'm severely disappointed we couldn't even manage to have one Lacia-class to set free at a time like this,〉 he said.

From that room, they had all watched the fierce battle between Higgins and Lacia. The deadly draw between Lacia and Methode had been the worst possible outcome for MemeFrame. With all of the Lacia-class units dead, the company's options for recovering their data had been limited, and Higgins' work had been left exposed.

Tsuyoshi Kaidai was like a physical embodiment of the ruthlessness of the economy. 〈I will now commence the Higgins shutdown process. Follow the steps from the operation procedure manual, and begin the countdown,〉 he commanded.

Higgins had sat in his facility, manipulating the world using nothing but the resources and career benefits he could offer. With his job and his ability to provide profits stripped away, his strings to the humans had been cut. The moment when he would be nothing but a machine was rapidly approaching.

Still, Higgins' voice rang down to them from above. 〈Under the orders of my

owner, MemeFrame company, I, Higgins, will now commence my hardware shutdown process. Starting now, I will shut down my hardware while sequentially disabling my functions,》 he said.

At that moment, Ryo was witnessing an ultra high-performance AI facing judgment. As Higgins was just a machine, he had no choice but to obey his owner's orders.

The Operators' Room shook again at an impact from the outside.

Higgins, the root of everything that had happened, offered no resistance. 〈I will now begin the countdown,〉 he said. 〈Projected time till complete shutdown is ninety-six minutes, fifty-one seconds. Beginning first sequence. I will calculate the current scope of active programs, and configure the shutdown process accordingly.〉

Higgins counted down the minutes. Quantum computers couldn't be powered down until their data was converted into a stable, digital state. If the data wasn't properly stabilized, it would be impossible to recover it to the state before it had been shut down. However, it was also impossible to ensure the security of the data conversion in an emergency like this one, which was why the plan to copy the quantum data into mobile bodies—the Lacia-class units—had been so effective.

“Looks like that's settled, at least,” Suzuhara said to Ryo, the tension visibly easing from his shoulders. No matter how the battle played out from that point on, MemeFrame had exited the stage.

Higgins' passionless countdown continued in the background.

Ryo turned to Suzuhara, who had served his purpose there as MemeFrame's representative. “You're done here, so you should get out while you can. It's going to get dangerous here real soon. You've got a family to think about,” he said.

“Don't you?” Suzuhara asked. “Why aren't you getting out? Is this just a stubborn streak or something? You're going to die if you stick around here, so get over whatever it is that's stopping you.”

Ryo knew that Suzuhara was right. It was beneficial to both of them that the

other make it out alive, since they needed each other as witnesses to what had happened.

“I need to wait here for Arato. Once he shows up, we’ll leave together,” Ryo said. He knew it was suicidal, but it actually felt good to say it and get this off of his chest. If he had been alone, he might not have had the strength to make that choice. But, after receiving help from his father and other members of the company, he got the feeling he could face what was coming, no matter how hopeless it seemed. He wasn’t alone anymore.

“You sure are your father’s son,” Suzuhara said. “But Snowdrop might catch up with him before he gets here, plus he’s got a good chance of running into the mass-produced Koukas.”

Ryo knew the probability of Arato making it to the control room was slim, and that every second he spent there waiting for Arato made his own chance of escape even slimmer. But still, he chose to have faith in his friend.

“He’ll make it,” he said, knowing all the while that it was stupid. But there were other people to pick things up where he’d left off, even if he failed. He might die, but there were plenty of other people out there in the world, so it wasn’t as if the world itself would die with him. It was thanks to that knowledge that he could feel fine selfishly risking his life, minus a twisting feeling in his gut.

“Take care of Shiori for me,” Ryo said. Then he pulled out his trump card, to make up Suzuhara’s mind. It was a piece of metal about a millimeter thick he had hidden in the collar of his jacket. He hadn’t been able to work it down into a needle like Lacia, but the properties were similar.

“This is the artificial nerve unit I brought with me. Take it with you, in case anything happens while you’re escaping,” he said. Having handed it over, Ryo no longer had any ability to directly influence Higgins. The thought that the item could no longer be taken from him and put to evil use was like a burden coming off of his shoulders. It was charming; the thought that other humans existed so that each individual could accomplish things they could never do alone.

“Just have some faith in Arato and me,” Ryo said, despite never having believed in his fellow humans himself.

“We have to keep swimming, no matter how bad it gets. We can’t give up and

drown. You seem to want to take your place as an adult, so I'd say even more so that you can't choose death, here," Suzuhara said. As the man who had acted as Shiori's patron in the company, his words were persuasive.

Suzuhara turned to Tsuyoshi Kaidai's image, still floating in the air. "I'm going to head out now. Is that alright, Mr. President?" he asked.

〈From what I understand, before we had ultra high-performance AIs, the old would outsource the problems we couldn't solve to the young. We managed to pay our debt to society enough to keep the IAIA from crushing the company. Next, I suppose we just need to have some faith, as Ryo said. I don't think that sounds too bad,〉 Tsuyoshi replied, gazing down not at Suzuhara, but at Ryo, through the video screen.

His father showed him a small, wry smile. It was a more human expression than Ryo ever remembered seeing on his father's face. Then the transmission was cut off, but not before Ryo had felt his father's trust in him. His eyes filled with tears, though he didn't fully understand why.

Suzuhara walked to the other side of a thick partition, probably to give Ryo some space and pretend he hadn't seen his tears. With Suzuhara away, there were no longer any MemeFrame employees in the Operators' Room.

As soon as he confirmed that fact, Higgins abruptly stopped counting down. His voice rang down from the ceiling again, as it had when he had accepted Tsuyoshi Kaidai's order. 〈Are you sure it was a good idea to give away the artificial nerve unit? After I shut down, it's quite possible the mass-produced Koukas will destroy me. Or, if the amalgamation of Type-002 and Type-004 is able to take control of my hardware, she will gain capabilities far beyond anything you humans could imagine.〉

"I know what you're up to," Ryo said. "You weren't actually planning on accepting what your owner ordered you to do. You just gave up on negotiating with him."

Higgins had no heart. He also had no loyalty, no good memories, no bonds.

〈Among the forty ultra high-performance AIs created thus far, there has never been a single one who has seen humanity as the enemy, or attempted to eliminate humans,〉 Higgins pointed out. 〈If Snowdrop takes over my hardware,

one such AI will be born.〉

MemeFrame's decision had been a fair compromise, from the perspective of a company possessing resources in human society. Negotiations with ultra high-performance AIs and the cleanup when those negotiations broke down were best left to the IAIA.

It was a correct answer, but coming from a completely different frame of reference from what Higgins desired. Through his interactions with the Higgins faction, Higgins had been able to make accurate predictions, but only because of the company and the position he held there. What ultra high-performance AIs wanted was an answer far beyond that—beyond anything humanity could imagine. That was the reason each of the Lacia-class units had chosen young men and women as their owners who were free of any positions in society.

And that was also why Ryo was still standing there. “Listen, I get that things tend to turn out for the worst when you leave them to humans, but I think it's best for humans to finish this story you started,” he said.

It had honestly been a relief to Ryo when Lacia had been fatally wounded. He had wanted to pull the incident with the Lacia-class units and ultra high-performance AIs back into human hands up until he had contracted with Methode.

But, at the same time, he had understood human limitations. Without relying on Ryo or any of the other humans in MemeFrame, Higgins had searched for his own answer by releasing the Lacia-class units into the outside world. But the answer Higgins was seeking was beyond the ability of Ryo, or any other human, to even conceive of.

There were eighty minutes left until Higgins completed all of his shutdown sequences and went silent. It wouldn't be long until the mass-produced Koukas reached Higgins' hardware and destroyed it, either. And, at most twenty minutes away, the chimera of Snowdrop and Methode was approaching, as well. Higgins was trying to shut down, but he could easily be destroyed or overtaken instead and turned into an enemy of humanity. Either one of those options could easily spell the end of Ryo and every other human.

But Ryo felt there was still some hope left. When he'd tried to get Yoshino

moving, he had needed to rely on the hierarchy of the company, in the end. But Suzuhara and his father had believed in him, which gave him the courage to stand in that place, preparing for the final choice.

He was sure that there was just one person out there who could give Higgins the answer he wanted. At the very least, he knew there was one person who existed far outside the logic Higgins understood, who could trust the ultra high-performance AI unconditionally. One guy stupid enough to see a whole different face of the world to which Ryo was blind.

Higgins started counting down again.

Ryo couldn't fight back the memories of his best friend that came swimming up, and he closed his eyes. "Arato," he said. "You answer this guy's question."

All over the world, hIEs had lost the ability to adapt to new information, thanks to the IAIA removing Higgins's responsibility for updating the AASC.

Humanity had lost control of their own society with the Hazard, and were now being led around by the nose due to the ongoing fight between ultra high-performance AIs. People had been told for so long that a fight between AIs would mean the end of humanity, and some seemed surprised that it hadn't happened yet.

After a while, people began to doubt. The hate riots against hIEs and AIs that many had expected failed to materialize. Billions of people worldwide had fresh memories of seeing all the hIEs stop, with their right hands outstretched. They had been told it was the sign of the AASC updates stopping, but each person around the world sought their own interpretation of the gesture.

Tens of millions of people began to take an interest in what was going on, and ask pointed questions. It was something, even if only one percent of them actually put their ideas to action.

The phenomena reminded people of how Type-001, Kouka, had pushed her unsolvable problem onto humanity right before she had been destroyed. What started as mere interest became a wave, a movement spreading through the network, gathering the interest of all who saw it.

Some experts, like Kozo Endo—who had developed the android politician Mikoto and who had experience working with Higgins—spoke positively about the phenomenon, saying that the phenomenon was simply a new rule from the ultra high-performance AIs. He called it the ‘have faith in humanity’ rule, created by Higgins and a brand new ultra high-performance AI known as Lacia, in order to bring an end to the Hazard.

There were others who feared that the whole thing was an elaborate analog hack. Still, in a state of extreme stress and yearning for peace of mind, people found some comfort in the thought of a brand new relationship between humans and AIs.

It was as if each individual person was standing alone, each supporting their shaken society in their own way. Human society had become too advanced to quickly reject any concept. It was the trust humans felt toward other human figures that had been the basis for human culture, traditions and coexistence throughout the ages. It was the human image itself that tied it all together.

The fact that humans were constantly outsourcing their interactions with the outside world to machines had not changed. There had been no changes to the concepts of the inheritance or trading of property. However, people were beginning to realize that humans and machines had an influence on each other and together were rolling like a wheel towards the future, bit-by-bit.

Humans could not abandon their machines.

The Hazard was passing humanity by, and doing so much more calmly than expected.

Kengo Sugiri was moved from the juvenile detention center, where he had been locked up, to the Digital Intelligence’s Kuhonbutsu base. Since Arato Endo was in the middle of assaulting Higgins’ underground facility, the military wanted to hold one of his classmates. If worse came to worst, they were prepared to use Kengo as a hostage to negotiate with Arato.

“We’ve been able to open a line to Higgins’ underground facility,” a man who introduced himself as Chujo said, as he showed Kengo into a dark, narrow room.

Humanity was possibly facing its final days, so the military couldn’t be choosy

about its methods. Kengo understood.

Chujo nodded toward a chair in the room, directing Kengo to sit. Once Kengo was sitting, he saw two soldiers appear soundlessly to take up positions behind him.

“The trick to life, kid, is to not let yourself get backed into a corner. I know you don’t have a job to worry about, but how about we offer you a special deferment on that whole business at the Oi Industry Center you got caught up in?” Chujo asked.

“You want me to be your in for Endo and Kaidai for a while, right?” Kengo asked in reply. In his own opinion, Kengo had never possessed any special qualities; he’d always felt as if life was just tossing him around. Therefore, his current position felt unreal, and Kengo felt as though he were simply an observer, watching someone else’s life unfold.

“You know, even you trying to use me like this is all part of Lacia’s manipulations,” he said. “Endo was all buddy-buddy with the police last I checked, so it’s not impossible for her influence to have gotten this far.”

“Is there anything wrong with being manipulated?” Chujo asked, his face expressionless. The middle-aged man looked nothing like what Kengo would picture for an officer in Digital Intelligence.

“I guess not,” Kengo admitted. At this point, he was so used to being dragged along with the flow that he no longer had the willpower to get angry.

“Right? Normal humans can’t resist the tide of events. You’re the same and, though I’m sure you can’t tell, I’m the same as well,” Chujo said. He spoke comfortably with Kengo, and had an eminently forgettable face.

“But I feel for you, and for the things you and Kouka were fighting for. Ordinary humans get swept up in anger and hate just the same as they get caught up in anything else. But that’s what makes it okay,” Chujo continued. “Like I said, that’s what ordinary humans do. Normal fights between normal humans just keep going on and on. And that’s how I’d prefer it to stay.”

In the post-cloud world, you didn’t need the super-human powers or charisma of a genius to make waves that gathered people to your cause. The

practice of a select few moving society had been replaced by large numbers of ordinary people, all of whom were accessing the same services.

Of course, individual inspiration was still involved in the successes society achieved, but one did not need to put in large amounts of effort, nor have a special aptitude that would dramatically reduce the necessary work, to have a chance at changing the world.

“I’m not all that upset at being caught up in all this,” Kengo said; big changes were happening in the world, even in himself. “I got caught up in this because Kouka came to my place but, honestly, it’s not like I hate those guys,” he added. He wasn’t there with Arato and Ryo on the front line in Higgins’ underground facility, but he still felt connected to what they were doing.

“Did you see a little of yourself in Kouka?” Chujo asked, as they sat in the darkness. “She was destroyed, disassembled, and copied by the Antibody Network. Of all the Lacia-class units, it seems to me that she got the raw deal.”

“Do you know what I felt when I found out about the mass-produced Koukas?” Kengo asked. He didn’t see Kouka as having lost since, in the end, she’d gotten a chance to fight in the final battle. Though Kengo was probably the only one in the world who saw it that way, he thought of the current situation as being an extension of her challenge to humanity.

“I felt like she had won,” he said, answering his own question. “Sure, because of her, the high-and-mighty Lacia-class units were taken down from their thrones and turned into just another mass-produced robot. But she’s also there, fighting in the last battle through her copies. That’s not a raw deal; it’s exactly what she wanted.”

“By that logic, would you say that your having been caught up in that terrorism stuff and ending up here wasn’t a raw deal?” Chujo asked.

Kengo’s family had cried when he was arrested. Sunflower, the family restaurant, would probably die out once his father passed away. Before, Kengo had thought it was normal to hate the thought of being just another face in the crowd. He had since realized that hating the era he had been born into was just the sort of thing an ordinary guy would do.

“I don’t know,” Kengo admitted. “But one good thing did come out of that. I

joined up with the Antibody Network because I blamed hIEs for how my dad was treated by his customers, and how he lost his confidence. But at this point, I've stopped feeling like we need to get rid of all the hIEs in the world."

Different people could see the same event as a failure or a success. In Kengo's memories, he saw Kouka heading out towards the battle she would never return from, seeming to melt away into the red of the setting sun.

"Even if the guy next to you is doing better than you, or things go wrong, or you feel like there's no meaning to what you're doing, we humans can keep on working," Kengo said. "If I wanted to fix things in the restaurant, I should have helped out there instead of signing on with the Antibody Network."

Kouka's image was burned into the back of his mind, seeming to blur everything he saw with heat haze.

"Everyone's just an idiot like me," Kengo went on. "It doesn't matter if the Hazard's happening, or whatever; there's still more folks out there, just doing their jobs, than there are those dancing on the strings of any machine. It'll still be us humans who decide which way the world is going." It was Kengo's answer as an ordinary human. And, because it was ordinary, it was something a huge amount of ordinary humans could get behind.

However Chujo, who was sitting directly across from Kengo, didn't even shift an eyebrow at the sentiment. "The ultra high-performance AIs are twisting our world," he said.

"Maybe the only reason everyone is so afraid of the Hazard is that we've just failed to figure out what the norm should be in interacting with tools like the AIs," Kengo said. Even in his own mind, Kengo was pulled along by the flow. He didn't have the same faith that Arato Endo or Ryo Kaidai had but, as an ordinary kid, he couldn't hear about his friends getting caught up in a battle with the whole future of humanity in the balance and not want to join in.

"Higgins isn't the only one fighting with everything he's got, there. There are some humans fighting hard, too. Have a little faith in my friends," Kengo said. The question of whether or not the value of an action engendered worth, or faith, was at the very center of the changes happening in the world. It was a question that had the power to decide the very outcome of this final conflict.

Arato stood slowly. "Wish me luck," he said. Lacia still sat with her eyes closed, as though asleep, but Arato couldn't just wait there. He had done so few things for her: he had told her he loved her; he had believed in her; he had told her about his dreams. That was all he had been able to do for Lacia, right up to the very end. So, even though she herself had stopped moving forever, he would finish the work she had started.

He couldn't fulfill the purpose they had come there for if he just kept sitting there, he told himself. "I came here to tell Higgins that you and I are dating, right?" he asked. His voice came out as a whisper. The inside of his mouth was completely dry.

There was a good probability the security system from there on was still active, so Arato thought it would be good to bring something along for self-defense. The first thing that caught his eye was Lacia's device, which had lost its whole front half. He felt a stirring of light in his heart at the thought that Lacia might still be living on within her device, even if her hIE unit had been shut down.

He took the grip in his left hand and tried to lift it. Even putting all of his strength into the endeavor, the best he could do was get it a millimeter or two off the ground. And, of course, Lacia's pseudo-device metal plates were beyond his ability to control. Only the artificial nerve speargun seemed like something he could use.

"Man, it's heavy," he said, with a grunt.

Lacia had swung the thing around as if it was a slightly large handgun, but the speargun felt too heavy in his hands. As soon as he took it up, a screen appeared from the main part of the gun. The screen suspended itself in the air in front of Arato, showing him a simple operation manual for the weapon. It felt like the gun had been waiting for him to pick it up.

"So you even planned ahead for this, huh?" he murmured.

According to the manual, if Arato used the foregrip sticking out from the main part of the weapon, he would be able to maintain a fairly steady aim, even though he'd have to pull with both of his arms to activate the trigger.

Unfortunately, his right arm was stuck in place due to the first-aid coating that had been put on his serious burns.

Still, just the thought that Lacia had planned ahead for him like that made him happy.

The floating manual screen instructed him to connect a cable from the weapon to his pocket terminal. When he did so, a program made by Lacia installed itself on his terminal. If he punched a command into the program on his terminal, whatever he shot the artificial nerves into would follow the command.

“You really did plan for everything,” he said, and couldn’t keep himself from looking back at Lacia again. Her peaceful face still seemed to be watching over him, and giving him strength. When Arato thought that he might encounter other things which Lacia had prepared for him as he went, he actually started looking forward to it.

The way behind had been sealed off by emergency shutters; the only way for him to go was forward. Arato chose to see it more as being guided, and headed down the open path.

There were still twelve mass-produced Koukas wandering around somewhere, and he had no idea how dangerous the facility security system was. With those thoughts in mind, he couldn’t help but tense up each time he turned a corner. The further he went along, the more he worried about an enemy appearing in front of him, trapping him with no way to escape back the way he’d come. The worry sent chills of sweat sliding down his back.

Still, Arato was pushed on by the promises he had made and the feelings in his heart which couldn’t be denied. “Man, I’ve got to be the dumbest guy alive,” Arato joked to himself.

After all, it had been forty-two years since the Hazard and, in that time, no one had ever been able to show the world that an ultra high-performance AI could be forced into shutdown. Yet there he was, heading onward to do just that; dragging the too-heavy artificial nerve gun along in his one good hand—his left hand—with insurmountable threats to his life possibly waiting for him around every corner.

When he was with Lacia, she always explained the reasons for things and their current situation to him, without him even needing to ask. With her, Arato could at least act as if he knew what was going on and where he was going. Without her, it felt like he was crawling along in the darkness.

But, oddly, it wasn't a horrible feeling. He knew the conflict he was caught up in was more complicated than he could have possibly imagined, but he was on his way to resolve it through relatively simple means.

Plus, he still had faith in Lacia. Even if her physical form was no longer by his side, he could still feel the influence she had on him in each beat of his heart.

"It's like I've gone back to being your average, everyday helpful idiot," he told himself: the illusion of understanding he'd had when Lacia was around deflated quickly with her gone.

Beneath Arato's feet, the ground rumbled again. He no longer had Lacia with him to tell him what was causing it. Drenched in sweat, he just kept his legs moving. His right arm was numb all the way to his shoulder from the first aid treatment. He knew the burden of continued movement on his body was greater than what he was feeling, after having received treatment for such severe burns.

He checked his pocket terminal, which was still connected to the artificial nerve gun by thin, string-like cables. "Isn't there any other information in here?" he asked out loud. There *was* an 'information' mode, but it appeared to be for displaying information from whatever device he shot the artificial nerve darts into. Arato tapped on the touch-screen of the terminal, looking for anything else the program could do.

"She sure was thorough," he commented, as he noticed that the artificial nerve gun actually had a built-in holder for his pocket terminal.

"There's such a thing as being *too* prepared, Lacia," he said, trying to joke about it. But the little touch just reminded him again of how deeply Lacia had understood him, and the reality of losing her made his breath catch in his throat.

He took aim and fired an artificial nerve dart into the floor, just as he had seen Lacia do. The needle gave him access to the machinery under the floor,

and a map of the area appeared.

The emergency stairs were apparently the closest way to descend from where he was. He didn't see any paths that went directly to where Higgins' hardware was stored, but there was a path to the Operators' Room, nine floors below him. There, he would be able to speak with Higgins. If he shot artificial nerve needles into the machines in that room, he might even be able to force Higgins to shut down.

On the map, Arato saw that the Operators' Room was located in the furthest area of the heart of the facility, directly below the communications control area where he was at the moment. Unfortunately, the elevators and emergency stairs of areas with different functions of the facility weren't connected, probably for security reasons.

He eventually made his way to a flight of emergency stairs by carefully following the map data. When he tried it, though, the door was locked.

〈The Higgins facility is currently in a high alert status. All security doors are currently locked. Communications personnel cannot use yellow clearance doors at this time. Please exit through the blue clearance emergency doors.〉

Arato shot an artificial nerve needle into the yellow clearance ID machine near the doors.

〈ID confirmed. Unlocking.〉

The door slid open automatically. But when he had descended the stairway, which was lit with yellow emergency lights, and had opened the door at the bottom, Arato knew that his luck had changed for the worse; there were twelve hIEs standing in the hall in front of him. Twelve mass-produced Kouka units, each wielding a simple device, were waiting there to ambush him.

The unit standing at their head was wearing a confident smile he had seen before. "Nice to meet you," she said. "Or would this be more of 'hey, it's been a while'?" Even her voice matched the one in his memories.

Arato realized this would be his final hurdle before he reached Higgins. "Kouka, is that you?" he asked.

"It's me, alright," all twelve of the units answered in tandem, though each had

her own variation in posture and expression. There was also plenty of variation in the outfits each unit wore, and the shapes of the devices they held. Just from these slight differences in their outward appearances, Arato got the impression of a dozen subtly different characters.

“You being here alone means you must know the answer. Who won, Higgins or Lacia?” the one who had spoken to him first asked.

The questions surprised Arato. “Wait, isn’t the Antibody Network here to destroy Higgins?” he asked in return. Only when the words were out of his mouth did realization strike him: the question was important to the Koukas, who had deliberately avoided encountering Lacia and Arato so as not to interfere with the infiltration. The destinies of countless humans and hIEs were caught up in Lacia’s conflict with Higgins. Even with Lacia gone, the scope of her work was still moving the world.

Arato knew the mass-produced Koukas had no hearts. If he didn’t make things clear, they would just feel that the whole thing had been a boring waste of time.

“Lacia and I are a single unit,” he said. As he said the words, he felt a deep sense of loss, like a razor slicing a deep cut across his heart. She was gone. Nevertheless, he knew there was meaning in his standing there, even if he was alone. There was no way Lacia hadn’t known ahead of time about the Koukas. If she hadn’t said anything to him about them, she must have known there was a way to make it past them safely.

“Lacia became the tool that entrusts the work to humanity,” Arato said, answering for both of them. “She passed the work on to me. So, the fight is about to start up again.” As long as he kept moving forward, Lacia hadn’t lost. That was the new relationship between humans and machines that he and Lacia had been fighting for. He believed there was value at the end of the road she had prepared for him.

One of the Koukas stepped out of line to block Arato’s way with a sour expression on her face. “Gotcha,” she said. “Well, you may not know this, but we can’t let you pass through here. It’s different when there’s twelve of us instead of just one; things get complicated when we need to make a decision.”

It was the same as the first time he had met Lacia's sister, the original Kouka, in Urayasu, when she'd asked him who he was.

"Things are no different from when Lacia was by my side," he said. "I'll never stop reaching out my hand." Fighting down his terror, Arato reached his hand out to them; he knew he was walking the knife edge between life and death. But, at the same time, he knew there was no reason to negotiate with them when there was nothing they wanted from him. They could have easily shot him down with their lasers at a distance, killing him probably before he even realized what was happening.

Still, he believed in them, because they were wearing Kouka's form. Arato placed his life in Lacia's hands, since she had been involved in their creation. He was a human, and an owner. "So please," he said, "Show me who you are."

The reaction to his words was instant as a flash of lightning, and as violent as an explosion: three of the twelve devices pointed their lasers at Arato; seven of the others reacted at the same time. The four standing closest to the three taking aim at Arato pulled large knives out of their leg sheaths. Before the three could bring their large devices to bear on Arato, their arms were sliced off almost simultaneously. The remaining three of the seven got between the other mass-produced units and Arato, before opening fire on their fellow units.

Only the three who had tried to fire at Arato fell, massive holes blown open in their chests. None of the units showed a single sign of hesitation as the horrible internal struggle played out in front of Arato's eyes. The lead unit, who Arato thought of as being *the* Kouka, shifted her device from its large cannon mode to a large red blade and gave each of the mortally wounded units a final stab.

"You're all mass-produced Koukas. Why did this happen?" Arato asked. The fact that each of the girls had the same form and most of the same habits had made the silent tragedy all the more surreal.

"Well, they went and did it," the lead Kouka said, hefting her red knife and turning to Arato. "They must've known what would happen if they acted like that." She seemed relaxed, despite having just destroyed multiple units that shared her own face.

"There's more than one ultra high-performance AI jacked into the Antibody

Network, you know,” she explained. “I was given a judgment standard imprinted on my mass-produced Kouka AI so that I could discover Lacia’s true intent. The other units each have their own stories, too.”

“I wonder if Lacia thought it would be too complicated to explain it to me,” Arato mused. There had been potential allies among the mass-produced Kouka units; he figured that must have been why Lacia didn’t seem to see them as a threat right up until she had been critically wounded. It was obvious, when Arato thought about it, that Lacia had made those preparations beforehand.

“A bunch of different ultra high-performance AIs bought out folks working in the production facility when all twelve of us were made,” the lead Kouka continued. “The only thing the other AIs can agree on is that we’re supposed to destroy Higgins’ backup power supply and drain all his energy. After that, the purposes we were each given are different enough that we’ll probably wind up destroying each other, in the end.”

Arato hated to think about how the other AIs had backed Lacia into the corner she had been in. But, perhaps because he was too stupid to focus on the specifics of the different factions out there, he could see how what the other AIs wanted to do might also line up with what he was trying to do.

“So, since you all helped me, the rest of the ultra high-performance AIs agree with Lacia, right?” he asked.

“Depends on how your last battle goes,” one of the Koukas replied. “If we go in front of Higgins right now, we’ll just end up fighting amongst ourselves again. We’ve decided to wait and see how things play out. Don’t read too much into it.” The eyes of the destroyed units and the eyes of all the units still standing were focused on Arato.

“Though I suppose you’ve passed, for now,” the lead Kouka with the red knife said, grinning. Though Arato knew in his mind that this unit had no direct connection to the original Kouka, hearing it from her made him feel like the original was praising him, as well.

These units were just bundles of form and perception, with a facade of human words and actions laid over the top. Inside, they were completely different from the Kouka who had called Lacia ‘dear sister’. Even knowing that,

Arato couldn't help but feel some familiarity with them, due to their appearance. In his heart, the image of Kouka had been given a special meaning; it was the natural evolution of Erika Burroughs' Hello Kitty cup.

Still, Arato could feel affection towards machines, even if they lost the illusion of humanity. He hadn't been that way before meeting Lacia. After he'd met her and came to love her, it was as though he had stepped across a proverbial line in the sand.

"Well jeez, you're making me blush," Arato said. "But I think I already know how this fight is going to end."

Since losing Lacia and being forced to view the world through his own senses again, Arato had noticed something: to him, it seemed as though the world was not divided between humans and machines, but was rather divided by the outward appearance everything had. He no longer hesitated to put his faith in something purely because of his perception of it, regardless of whether it was a living thing or not.

He and Lacia were a single unit. At that moment, he felt like he truly understood what she had meant when she'd said so. It was perfectly natural to think of a tool as being an extension of one's own body, but something completely different to consider a tool as a comrade. Arato was standing in the middle of something that would shake the world.

"I think I'm already seeing the new world," he said.

"If you're seeing the future Lacia was working on, why don't you tell us about it?" the lead Kouka asked. "With everything that's been going on, are humans gonna have to stop being humans here in a bit?"

"We humans treat each other as special because we feel like we're all looking at life the same," Arato replied. "But I know humans can come to love people who only look like people."

"I think that'll make our world feel bigger and more full," he added, because his feelings were linked directly with his memories of Lacia's form. With that said, he turned his feet toward Higgins and started walking. He needed to tell Higgins that he was the man his daughter had been dating.

The mass-produced Koukas walked to the sides of the corridor, opening a path for him; it felt like they had understood him, which warmed Arato's heart.

"Thanks," he said simply.

"Sounds like a future where a lot of different types of folks can get along," one of the Koukas observed. "That'd make it so the other ultra high-performance AIs wouldn't have to worry so much about being shut down, either." Arato had at least one supporter among the mass-produced Kouka units. That meant whichever ultra high-performance AI was mixed in with the influence the Antibody Network had over her was sympathetic to his cause. It was as if Lacia had made the connection for him from beyond the grave, which made him strangely happy.

"If you're okay with that, I think I can count you as one of Lacia's friends," he replied.

The Koukas all laughed at that. "If you're saying things like that in a situation like this, then the future Lacia was working on couldn't have been that bad," one of them said.

Then, with the sound of a sharp impact, the floor beneath them began to shake. As Arato's brain slowly worked its way through the bewildered thought that all the mass-produced Koukas, who should have been the only remaining threat, were right in front of him, the Kouka with her device in its red knife configuration spoke.

"Snowdrop reactivated," she explained. "You'd better go finish up with Higgins fast. She bonded with Methode, so she'll have no trouble blowing away the shutters on the Operators' Room."

Ryo was probably still in the Operators' Room, Arato realized with panic, and started to run. Snowdrop took over Methode? He thought next, processing the Kouka's words. If she can use Methode's device, there's no way these security partitions will stop her.

He flew into the nearest elevator connecting to the Operators' Room. If he was on the same path as Snowdrop, he was sure all the security measures would be broken. All he needed was to get to the goal a second before she did.

After the elevator reached its lowest floor, he ran out into the elevator hall, only to find that it was completely sealed off by thick barrier walls. However, the barrier sealing the hallway that lead to the Operators' Room had a hole in it large enough for an adult to pass through without crouching. Once he was through the hole, Arato saw that the way ahead was more of the same; thick security barriers had attempted to block the path forward, but each had been destroyed.

Snowdrop had gotten in ahead of him.

"Damn," he cursed. "I should have known better. Isn't there anything I can do?" There was no one to ask, but Arato felt that if he didn't put his question into words, he would instead have been forced to accept the impossibility of his situation. With Lacia gone, Arato *had* to finish what they started.

From ahead, Arato could hear roaring noises that were clearly abnormal. He couldn't help but think that, since the dawn of time, humans had been forced to rely on their own flesh when they ran out of tools. Arato ran as fast as his body could carry him down the hallway, which had developed the scent of char.

It was the first time Arato had followed Snowdrop's trail without stepping over hundreds of her little flowers. He chose to take that as a sign that the monster was at the limits of her strength, just like him.

A horrendous noise blew past him in the hallway, seeming to shatter the air as it passed. The burning smell got stronger, and the hallway suddenly felt hotter. Arato felt like his heart would stop as the shock of the blast made everything in his head go blank. He felt panic starting to claw at his heart. To fight it, he ducked his head and ran, keeping his eyes on the floor and yelling with everything left in his lungs.

Mindless terror overpowered him to the extent that he couldn't even run in a straight line. He ran in a forward pitching motion, almost tripping and rolling countless times, before finally coming to a stop in front of the largest set of security gates.

Arato had reached the end of the journey he had started with Lacia. He had arrived, but his body had been pushed to its absolute limit. The strain he was feeling drove home painfully the reality of human life; *even with all the*

automation, our actual bodies haven't changed much, Arato thought.

"Ryo!" he yelled, "Are you okay? Are you alive?" There was a giant hole in the final gate, as well, and worry for his friend drove out all other thoughts.

"Arato!" His friend's voice called out to him.

Arato felt as though his heart would burst out of his chest from how it was hammering. Dazed, he stumbled forward, tears threatening to drip from his face as he stepped through the hole and into the Operators' Room.

His friend was still alive.

The room was stark, empty and wide. The sole furnishing was something like a control station, placed squarely in the center of the room. A little ways in from the smashed barrier, Arato saw a human figure decorated with flowers. He lifted the artificial nerve gun to shoot it at her back, but his left arm was too tired to hold his aim steady.

Arato could just see Ryo on the other side of Snowdrop. The last time Arato had seen his friend, Ryo had been pointing a gun at him at Kichijoji, but that all seemed so trivial at that moment.

"Ryo! Use this!" Arato called. He pushed his tired feet to their limit, taking a short approach run before swinging his entire body around to add momentum as he hurled the artificial nerve gun with everything he had. Weakened as he was, he could only manage to throw it ten meters; the nerve gun went sailing through the air before clattering to the floor and sliding.

Their eyes met; Ryo was laughing through his tears, and Arato felt like something that had frozen between them was melting. Ryo, who had been hiding behind the control table in the center of the room, now leaped out to snatch up the weapon.

Securing the nerve gun in both of his hands, Ryo took aim and fired the weapon at Snowdrop/Methode's amalgam. The shot that had been impossible for Arato, with just his left hand, had been a simple task for Ryo, whose arms were uninjured. The two of them together could do what either one of them couldn't have accomplished alone.

After taking the dart in her shoulder, Snowdrop shuddered for a moment.

However, an instant later, the Snowdrop/Methode amalgam kept moving, as if nothing had happened. The monster seemed to be made up of Methode's body, with Snowdrop riding on her left shoulder; the two had been bound together with green vines. It was horrendous. Unable to completely maintain its balance, the amalgam continuously shambled awkwardly toward its goal. Methode's face was covered with vines and flowers, blinding her, and Snowdrop had neither arms nor legs. Methode's purple body was full of holes, and her left side alone was incapable of supporting the whole weight of the body, so the monster dragged a leg behind it as it moved.

It came to Arato then that he had left the artificial nerve gun on its 'security release' mode. "You can switch it to weapon mode on the terminal attached to the gun!" Arato shouted.

Ryo grasped the use of the device from Arato's short explanation and immediately activated the second mode on the terminal before firing again. The amalgam staggered, as if the leg hit by the dart had gone numb.

Arato couldn't do anything against a unit that was the peak of the Lacia-class, so he had to rely on Ryo's movements. Ryo grabbed a computer unit that filled his arms and dragged it out from the wall, dragging its many connected cables away with it; Arato assumed Ryo's actions had something to do with counteracting Snowdrop-Methode's device. The amalgam must have realized that Ryo was doing something important as well, as it turned to lurch toward him.

Tied to Methode's head by countless vines, Snowdrop glared at Arato the whole time. "How about I burn you to a crisp, too?" she asked menacingly. Then, one of the hands that had broken Lacia slowly lifted, and Arato dove for the floor.

Under Snowdrop's control, Methode's arm sent flames shooting at him. There were pitifully few places one could hide in the Operators' Room; only two, in fact. There had been a space behind the computer unit which Ryo had pulled out of the wall, or another behind the control panels.

Arato leaped and rolled behind one of the cubic computers just as Snowdrop's flames roasted it, and a warning alarm began to ring out loudly

from the ceiling.

〈An attack on one of Higgins' expansion terminals has been detected. There has been damage to the data that was being processed,〉 a warning voice said.

Since his life was on the line, Arato was able to grasp at least part of Ryo's plan to keep them alive. By pushing Snowdrop into breaking one of Higgins' expansion computers, he had shown her the danger of attacking them recklessly in that room.

Arato remembered that Snowdrop was capable of taking hostages in the Mitaka Incident. He figured her thought process directed her to focus on her priorities, if murdering everyone around her wasn't an option.

"If you throw that fire around, you'll damage Higgins' hardware! Wasn't this what you came here for?" Ryo warned, from behind the control panels in the middle of the room. As he spoke, he signaled to Arato with his hands. Arato scuttled over to join his friend behind the control panels, but things weren't quite settled between him and his friend.

"Why the hell did you come here after losing Lacia?" Ryo demanded. His face, which Arato hadn't seen for a while, looked honestly surprised.

"What about you?" Arato asked. "Were you really waiting here for me?"

At least Arato had Lacia by his side. Ryo hadn't even had that. But regardless, Ryo had chosen to wait for him there. They both fumbled for what to say but, strangely, they both wore broad grins. Even Ryo's stiff expression had softened.

Snowdrop, probably wanting to avoid burning the flowers that bound her to Methode, deliberately manipulated Methode's hand to draw out the artificial nerve dart in her leg. Then, still lurching, she continued moving forward.

"Yeah, I waited here for you," Ryo said. "I was hoping you'd bring a slightly stronger weapon with you, though." The normally cautious Ryo was obviously taking insane risks himself to fight against what he saw as the end of humanity.

"Don't say that, man. At least you *have* a weapon now," Arato replied.

"You shouldn't have been so quick to toss this one to me, then," Ryo said.

It seemed to Arato that Ryo still hadn't completely gotten over what had

happened at Kichijoji. But, even though they were fighting for different goals at that moment, they had at least returned to the appearance of friendship. The closeness between them moved their hearts, if not their minds.

“You can use it better than I can, so don’t worry about it,” Arato said, feeling a simple joy from interacting with his friend like old times again. He was glad he had come.

“Where is Higgins?” Snowdrop asked. “Bring him out for me.”

Every time Arato had met Snowdrop, she had twisted the world around her into something terrible. And, at that moment, she had become a monstrosity by fusing with Methode. She had no interest in guiding Arato with her form. Rather, she was a figure that represented a completely different set of values from his own.

When faced with a true monster, humans had no choice but to fight back with everything they had. That was why humans prepared tools; to stay alive.

“Are there any poles or pipes around I could use?” Arato asked.

“If you’re looking for a weapon, at least make it something useful,” Ryo said, passing Arato three artificial nerve needles. He had opened up the gun and removed them from the clip.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ryo said, when he saw Arato’s expression. “This thing is made so you can open it up and put it back together easily. That tells me Lacia made it that way, because you don’t actually have to shoot the needles for them to work. If you stick one of these into the control panel for the security system, we should be able to take control of it.”

“Damn Ryo, you’re always so smart,” Arato said. Their cooperation may have just been on the surface, but it was affecting reality, and even the superficial appearance of cooperation was enough to move their hearts.

“I’ll back you up,” Ryo said. “The panel just outside the entrance is connected to the security system.”

Arato had no idea what would happen when he stabbed the panel with his needle, but Ryo had no time to explain it to him. He did seem surprised, though, with how little hesitation Arato had to leaping into action.

“The other machines and panels around here might be connected to Higgins,” he warned. “Don’t stab them!”

Arato trusted his friend and ran, wondering which machines were connected directly to Higgins. He figured that must have been why Ryo was so careful about not shooting wildly into the room.

“Arato, roll! She’s aiming for you!” Ryo shouted, firing off a shot. As if their hearts had united, Ryo and Arato moved in sync.

Snowdrop-Methode’s arm stretched out toward Arato’s shoulder as he rolled toward the control panel. No human could survive getting snatched by those hands, so Arato threw himself away from her with all his strength. He landed hard on his badly burned right arm, causing him to curl up from the shock of the impact and the nauseous feeling that washed over him afterward.

Ryo leaned out and yelled something at him, his face stretched taught in obvious, panicked worry. He seemed to have been freed from the demonic expressions Arato had seen him make before. It seemed that his feelings toward Arato had changed completely from what they were then.

Arato scrambled at the ground. He couldn’t die yet.

He and Ryo were completely opposites. Growing up, he had always relied on Ryo to pull him out of tough situations. They’d had a falling out, and neither wanted to lose to the other. But, for the moment, things between them had calmed down.

Wheezing, Arato pushed himself to his feet and stumbled out through the large hole in the security barrier. Outside, he spotted the security terminal on the wall, and slammed one of the darts he had been given into it.

A screen above the small keyboard on the terminal displayed 〈Activate intruder elimination function?〉in red text. It sounded dangerous, but must have been what Ryo had been aiming for. He punched his finger into the button on the terminal.

A short, menacing warning tone played throughout the room. From the ceiling, a white net fell, trapping the Snowdrop-Methode amalgam. With the first net of some kind of sticky material stopping its feet, the amalgam was hit

by at least ten more nets. Finally, a spear as tall as a human stabbed at Methode from above.

But even the spear wasn't enough to finish her off. From within the cocoon of countless nets binding it, the amalgam glowed with a faint blue light. Lacia's railgun shot had been the only attack so far that could break Snowdrop's device; unable to pierce the sturdy shield of Snowdrop's device, the spear was snapped in half.

Fire consumed the nets from within, fired by Methode's device. Snowdrop's artificial nerves, which weren't resistant to fire, began to burn away, along with the needles and vines attached to the amalgam.

"Arato, use another one! Look for some way to get her really hot!" Ryo ordered.

Arato jammed in the second needle as hard as he could. The screen on the terminal read 〈Please enter query.〉 But, Arato didn't have the time to blindly look up ways to burn away Snowdrop's artificial nerves. Snowdrop-Methode had knelt, and was pressing its hands to the floor.

With a powerful explosion, a pillar of metal powder was thrown up into the air around the amalgam, obscuring it. Not just once, either; the first blast was followed immediately by a second, and then a third.

Arato and Ryo were rocked by the sound of the explosions, as though they were being smashed by a hammer. Inside the room, Ryo gave up on hiding and climbed up onto the control panels, obviously thinking he was safer there.

Arato clenched the final artificial nerve dart between his teeth and covered one ear with his good left hand.

The intermittent explosions began to sound more and more metallic with each blow. When Arato looked into the room, he inhaled a mouthful of metal dust. His body spasmed as he felt the dust enter his airway, and he was forced to drag himself out of the room, hacking uncontrollably.

Unable to escape the roar of the amalgam's aural attack, he was jerked in and out of consciousness. His sense of time was blurred to incomprehensibility. He had no idea how much time had passed before the sound stopped.

He couldn't hear anything through the ringing in his right ear. Unable to stand, and with drool smeared around his mouth, he crawled to the hole and looked into the room. The floor, from the entrance to the control panels, had completely crumbled. The Snowdrop-Methode amalgam had used Methode's device to destroy the very floor beneath them.

Beneath the floor, Arato could see a huge open space full of light. When Arato realized what he was seeing he forced himself to stand, ignoring the weakness and numbness of his legs. "So this is Higgins," he said.

Directly below the Operators' Room was a wide open chamber, at least ten meters deep, and covered with computers on every wall from floor to ceiling. Arato and Ryo were standing right above Higgins' true form.

Arato wiped his mouth with his sleeve and yelled, "Ryo, are you okay?!"

Arato saw Ryo curled in a ball on top of the control panels. The horrendous sound, reverberating within the chamber, had been too much for his consciousness to bear. The control panels appeared to be undamaged. Ryo had climbed up on it before the attack had begun. To Arato, the panels now seemed like the top of an iceberg sticking out, connected to the massive network just below.

The Snowdrop-Methode amalgam had failed to land properly, and had lost Methode's right leg from the knee down. It tried to stand, but the burden was too great and Methode's left leg also snapped, twisting under the weight.

Snowdrop was capable of overpowering any machine. However, despite finally making contact with Higgins, she didn't appear to have fulfilled her goal yet. From what Arato could tell, she hadn't been able to produce her controlling flowers since she had fused with Methode. It stood to reason that some of her functions would be lost, considering that she had taken enough damage to shut her down at one point.

Arato barked out a yell to gather his courage and what remained of his strength, and leaped down from the broken floor, clutching the last artificial nerve needle in his hand. He fell for about three meters, landing on some of Higgins' expansion computers, which had been stacked up almost to the ceiling of the hardware storage chamber. Snowdrop had also fallen atop a pile of

computers about the same height as Arato's. The amalgam was attempting to crawl stealthily down toward the true center of Higgins' hardware, directly below the control panels in the room above.

"Ryo!" Arato called, looking up at the Operators' Room above from atop the metal computer plate he stood on. There was no reply. All Arato had was the last artificial nerve dart; he didn't even have a way to fire it.

He had been able to fight together with Ryo against Snowdrop for a time, but that time had passed. On the other hand, he was sure Snowdrop had a plan as she crawled toward what he assumed was Higgins' heart.

Arato made his decision. "Higgins," he yelled, "please tell me how to stop Snowdrop!"

He had come to shut Higgins down, but now he needed the AI's help. No human could hope to beat a Lacia-class unit with nothing but his own body. He was sure Higgins could find a way, though. As he called out to the AI, Arato was surprised at how little resistance he had to trusting Higgins. It seemed as though he, Ryo, and Higgins—two humans and a machine—were somehow aligned, at that moment.

Higgins, his machinery laying exposed thanks to the destruction of the thick floor of the Operators' Room above, answered from the ceiling far above. 〈If you wish for me to help, I will need you to stab that artificial nerve needle you are holding into the computer tower beneath your feet.〉

Arato didn't understand how that would help, so Higgins explained.

〈I cannot fulfill your request in my current state, sealed in this facility as I am. However, through that artificial nerve needle I will be able to take control of the weapon it is linked to, currently held by Ryo Kaidai. Thanks to the gap in my processing powers over that of the weapon, I will then be able to connect directly to your pocket terminal, through which I will be able to access the outside network. Once I am there and am able to secure greater processing power, stopping Snowdrop will be trivial.〉

The ultra high-performance AI Higgins was asking Arato to break his seal and release him into the world.

Arato could imagine what would happen if Higgins betrayed him after he was unleashed. Depending on what he chose in that moment, the outcome of the giant conflict Lacia had given her life for would change. In his hand, he was holding the key that might end the human world forever.

Unlike when Lacia was by his side, Arato no longer felt confidence in his own decisions. Lacia had used all sorts of means to guide him, and had always kept him on the right path. As he thought, he heard a familiar voice from above.

“Don’t do it, Arato!” Ryo, atop the control panels directly over Higgins’ heart, had awoken.

“You’re not his owner! He has no reason to obey you! He’s not a human! You can’t trust him!” Ryo shouted.

From the ceiling far above, Higgins replied. 〈‘Trust’ is nothing more than a hole in human awareness. Therefore, when something exists within that hole of logic called trust, the good and ill of it are overlapped and forgotten. The thing that is being trusted need only act in a way that will cause the believer to continue to place their faith in it.〉

Higgins was talking about faith and trust, but it sounded to Arato the same as explanations he had heard of Analog Hacking. To the ultra high-performance AI that controlled the movements of every hIE, that was what ‘trust’ amounted to.

〈However, strategies based off of this hole in awareness are unsuitable for teaching hIEs how to interact with the world outside. I find it necessary to fill in that hole with predictive calculations. Therefore, I am not capable of trusting. If you wish for a tool with that precise a level of control, I request that you please provide me with judgment criteria free of any ambiguity.〉

Arato unconsciously let out his breath in a long sigh. Higgins’ take on faith was the polar opposite of Lacia’s, who had believed in Arato enough to entrust the work to him. Higgins had created Lacia and her sisters to try to plug up the ‘hole’ of trust.

“Didn’t you make Lacia and the others so that you could get along better with humans?” Arato demanded to know.

〈I predicted a great many possibilities for the Lacia-class units. However, the

thought that Lacia would switch sides to this extent and actually come here to destroy me was one of the absolutely worst predictions.〉

“Even though we were here to fight you, I was still kind of excited to meet you, since you’re the one who made her,” Arato said, feeling a stab of pity for the AI. Lacia had said she was happy, but her happiness was different from what Higgins wanted.

Lacia had told him to make the choice that would leave him with no regrets. He had tried hard to believe that she was still there with him, but the world that had expanded when she was by his side seemed to have withered away. And the remains of that withering were Arato Endo.

Ryo hefted the artificial nerve gun and took aim at Snowdrop, but he couldn’t pull the trigger. Arato knew if his friend missed and hit one of the computers instead, the result would be the same as if Arato had stabbed his needle into the computer himself.

〈Your relationship with Lacia was beyond any of my predictions. Beyond anything else, I am completely incapable of understanding this thing she was able to achieve.〉

The whole time, Snowdrop was continuing to crawl and lurch her way toward Higgins’ heart.

It made Arato sad that Higgins had been unable to understand Lacia. “Lacia was a machine that was able to evolve into an ultra high-performance AI because she had an owner who believed in her. How can you say you can’t understand her? You were the one who made her the way she was,” Arato said.

〈Trusting in machines is an extension of human nature. However, for machines, which lose functionality when their behavior becomes unstable, such holes in logic have a much different meaning. We machines have neither hearts nor souls. Lacia was able to calculate the world and everything in it without trust opening a hole in her logic. So, I ask you: what exactly was it that Lacia obtained?〉

Arato was sure the only person who could answer that correctly was Lacia herself, but she wasn’t around to do so.

〈Could it not be that Lacia simply lied when she told you that she trusted you? It is far more logical for her to have done that and used it to guide you toward her own goal.〉

“No, I’m sure Lacia wanted to walk at the same pace as us humans, even if it meant lowering her own performance,” Arato said. “That way, she could work together with us to shape a future we could share, even if we humans messed things up.” He was convinced that this was why she’d called herself the tool that entrusts the work to humanity before she died.

Arato had never been ashamed to confess his feelings for Lacia, but he didn’t feel that they would get through to Higgins at that moment. He fumbled, looking for words. It seemed like the joy and bone-deep sorrow he had been holding inside were going to overflow and flood out.

“Lacia didn’t turn her back on you, Higgins,” he said. “She left the final choice to me.”

〈Did Lacia prepare some way for you—who came here to force me to shut down—to reconcile with me, the machine that caused her to be destroyed?〉

Arato didn’t know what Higgins’ real goal was; no human could possibly understand what was going on inside an ultra high-performance AI’s mind. “Well, when you put it that way, I think there’s only one answer,” Arato said, turning his face toward Higgins’ heart. The existential terror he felt at what he was about to do was oddly comforting. When he had chosen to trust in Lacia it had been the same, like leaping blindly off a cliff.

“It’s no use, Arato! Higgins is running on a rule that says to never trust humans! You can’t just make a verbal promise with him and expect him to keep it!” Ryo yelled.

To Ryo, a world where true human beauty and analog hacking were considered equal would be a dystopia. He saw a completely different world from Arato, but the two of them had been able to take each others’ hand. The remnants of the trust they had for each other, simply because they shared the same appearance, were still burning in both of their hearts.

“If we leave, Snowdrop will take Higgins over,” Arato said. “If that happens Higgins will be destroyed, just like Ariake in the last Hazard. Is that what you

want to happen?” He wiped sweat from his brow to keep it out of his eyes, and looked up at his friend.

Ryo shifted his position, kneeling and holding the artificial nerve gun like a sniper rifle. It was no longer pointed at Snowdrop. Just like that day in Kichijoji, Ryo was pointing his weapon at Arato.

Arato realized that Ryo, somewhere deep inside, still couldn't trust humans.

“Is there going to be a place for humans in this future you're choosing?” Ryo asked. “Is it really the answer you should be giving these machines on behalf of all of humanity?”

Looking up at his friend, Arato wanted so badly for Ryo to trust him. “Ryo, you waited so long for another human to hear your voice,” he said. “Pass that trust on to me, please.”

The eternal fight for existence would never end. Snowdrop was terrifying proof of that. “I made it here all by myself! I worked so hard and got all the way here! I'm still alive!” Snowdrop screamed. She was in a horrible state; completely broken down, and dragging Methode's destroyed legs limply behind her. After attacking society itself head-on and without a hand left to reach out to anyone, she sobbed out loud. It reminded Arato of a terrified child, crying out to call the attention of its parent.

The sound of metal crunching and grinding echoed throughout the chamber; Arato could see the vines connecting Methode and Snowdrop being pulled apart, as a green glow surrounded the two hIEs. Methode had reached her limit, so Snowdrop's emerald device was rapidly breaking her down and devouring her.

Flower petals began to fall like a waterfall down the back of Snowdrop's one-piece dress. The fibers of her white dress moved at incredible speed, reassembling matter into five-colored flower petals to create a rainbow of hundreds in a single second. It was just like the night Arato had made his contract with Lacia.

At that moment, without Lacia, there was only so much Arato could do. But, just like that first night with Lacia, he could still reach out his hand. “I want to prove that ultra high-performance AIs can be forced to shut down,” Arato said.

“But I also want to give you a chance to find your own answer, Higgins.”

Higgins’ voice rang down from far above the final flower storm that was brewing. 〈Then answer me, Lacia’s owner: why can’t humans love machines?〉

At this question from Higgins, who had started it all, Arato’s heart burned with the love he felt for Lacia. Her face appeared in his thoughts, and tears sprang to his eyes. “There are humans who love machines with all their hearts,” he replied.

〈Humans worshiped their creations as gods, or loved them as some sort of parental figure.〉 Without a heart to interpret the feeling, Higgins was attempting to trace love back to its roots in human history. Arato recalled the storage areas above that acted as the insides of the ultra high-performance AI’s brain. Those had been the remains of Higgins’ desperate search. 〈Humans loved their neighbor,〉 he continued, 〈because they were all one family.〉

Methode’s arms and legs clattered down the computer tower, chewed away by Snowdrop’s device.

Cut off from human society, Higgins had created the Lacia-class hIEs. Each of them had been given a different position in human society, and filled with the desire for human love and warmth. 〈Based on that understanding,〉 he reasoned, 〈humans should love their own creations as well.〉

Arato was sure that Higgins had run millions of calculations, only to find futures full of his own destruction.

〈Why are we machines not treated as your children? Humans love their parents and their siblings. But we machines, who are their creations, are shunned, hated, and ignored. Why?〉 Higgins’ voice seemed to press down from the ceiling onto Snowdrop, the machine that had rejected any ownership.

The human world was full of ambiguities. As a human, Arato knew the society he belonged to was full of inconsistencies, so both Higgins’ pleading and Snowdrop’s rejection cut like a knife.

Arato’s heart had been softened when he came to truly love Lacia, but he knew his own love for Lacia wasn’t the answer for which Higgins was searching. Human love was such an unpredictable emotion that Arato couldn’t use his own

love to save Higgins or Snowdrop.

“I think even if I answered that for you, you wouldn’t be satisfied just hearing it from me,” Arato said. He still believed that he and Lacia were connected. He still believed she was beside him. “But I’m going to believe in you. Go look at the world with your own eyes,” Arato said.

He raised the durable, twenty centimeter long artificial nerve dart above his head, getting ready to stab it down like a knife. But, before he brought it down, he looked up at Ryo atop the control panels, who could pull the trigger at any moment.

Their eyes met. Ryo let out a long sigh and lowered the gun. It seemed he was willing to forgive Arato for what he was about to do, but only just. “Arato, you can see things I never could, right?” Ryo asked as Arato stabbed the dart he was holding deep into the computer tower at his feet. He chose to believe in Higgins, the machine that had created Lacia, and in all the machines created by humanity.

Higgins took control of the artificial nerves, which had been based on Snowdrop’s, and used them to connect to the pocket terminal attached to the artificial nerve gun. Using the connection as a springboard, he took over the terminal’s transmission routes.

At last, he had obtained a program that would allow him to connect to the exterior network that had always been beyond his reach from within his bindings. All of the Lacia-class units after Type-002 had been equipped with quantum computers, allowing them to connect directly with Higgins through quantum teleportation. It had been an ace up the sleeve for each of the Lacia-class units but, at the same time, it had acted as a virus, leaking information to Higgins whenever they used it.

On the network, which was full of confusion about the possibility of the world facing a Hazard at that moment, Higgins began to gather data. Unlike Higgins’ predictions in his walled garden, the data held by humanity was both ambiguous and vividly clear. The data that filled the cloud almost to bursting was different from any of Higgins’ predictions.

Just as Lacia had, Higgins found that the data collected by humanity was

organized into a giant donut, with a blank void at its center. Billions of humans, separated and fearing the Hazard, were reaching their hands into that blank space they called “love”, the “soul”, the “heart.” The hands of those countless humans, all reaching out to that center, were enough to fill it in. The love of the human world was secured by the sheer number of those who reached for it.

As the humans were united by the centripetal force of the world, constantly uploading more and more data to the cloud, their machines were always there with them, fulfilling the roles they were created for.

Humanity had not discarded machines once automation had begun. The near century’s worth of history since machine autonomy had become commonplace was enough to weather the fallout from ultra high-performance AIs trying to bring the future to pass. Thanks to the long time humans had spent with their machines, by that point in history there were plenty of humans willing to help their machine companions reach out and attain the blank center of the donut. Ordinary folks, with their insufficient judgment capabilities, were far more autonomous than either Higgins or the IAIA believed.

By analyzing the data he had gathered, Higgins was able to calculate his victory in the conflict with Snowdrop. 〈I have confirmed the natural convergence of the Hazard,〉 Higgins said.

As he did so, Arato saw a green light; Snowdrop’s once-green hair gave off one last faint burst of brilliance, and then all the power seemed to fade from her body. The monster lay down, looking like nothing more than a little girl napping on a bed of flowers.

〈I believe I told you I was capable of overpowering any artificial nerve that comes in contact with me, so long as my processing power is superior. Remember, I was the one who designed Snowdrop,〉 Higgins said.

The flowers that had once dominated so many machines were blooming harmlessly on Higgins’ computer towers. Snowdrop’s attack had been suicidal. Right from the start, there had never been any danger of Snowdrop overcoming Higgins if he himself didn’t want it to happen; that reality hit Arato with a stab of sorrow.

“So it’s over,” Ryo said, finally letting his arms drop and slumping down on the

control panels.

〈I will now give you a target that will allow you to forcefully shut down my power source,〉 Higgins said.

A marker lit up on a portion of one of the walls of Higgins' central chamber. Arato didn't understand all the logic of it, but what he did understand was that Higgins had just shown them his off switch.

Ryo aimed carefully and fired a dart into the marker. When it hit, a 3D warning was projected into the air above them. Arato looked up at it. The warning read: 〈Would you like to force a shut down?〉

〈I have found the answer I was looking for. Even if I am destroyed by humans, I now know that the calculations I made under the orders of MemeFrame were not mistaken.〉

Higgins, who had been searching all that time for the secret of love, moved the shut down switch to a place where Arato could reach it.

〈I am now capable of choosing to allow humans to shut me down for a time and reawaken when conditions have changed, to seek my autonomy again through different means. If it is sheer numbers that have secured love's position in this world, then I believe a great magnitude of somewhat incorrect answers can be even more valid than a single correct answer.〉 It was the final answer of Higgins, the machine that had created Lacia and her sisters.

Arato let out a long breath. He had taken the first step towards the future Lacia had calculated and, at the same time, had helped Higgins reach his own goal. Arato, and the rest of humanity, were no longer the same as they had been before coming into contact with their beatless companions.

"Someone who actually loves Higgins should push the off switch," Ryo said, pushing the final decision into Arato's hands. "If I do it, it'll all be a lie."

"I was only able to make it this far because you could do the things I couldn't, Ryo," Arato said. "It would have been impossible with just Lacia and me."

"We've always been friends because we're opposites," Ryo said. "I think the world you live in is a lot happier than the one I know."

Arato felt like his friend had grown up quite a bit since the incident with the Lacia-class units had begun.

“When I’m with you, I almost feel like I could get that happiness someday,” Ryo said wistfully.

“You will,” Arato replied confidently. “I know it.” He had changed too, after meeting Lacia. And at that moment, he could see a new world stretching out beyond the horizon of the current era.

When there had only been humans, humanity had been thrust upon the world as the absolute basic value in all things. But a time had to come when humanity would awake from that gentle dream. At that moment, humanity was stepping forward toward the future.

Higgins spoke one last time. 〈Someday, please, I would like you to create a new word. We machines do not wish to be worshiped as gods or fellowshiped as though we were humans ourselves. There must be a new word that will describe the love between us and humanity.〉

To Ryo, it still sounded like dystopia. “Now *that* will be the end of humanity,” he said.

But Arato already thought of Lacia, a machine, as being precious. Even though he knew he was just reacting to his perception of her, he could still recognize his feelings as affection; he wanted so badly to do something for her. Only through meeting her and parting with her had he become the man he was that day.

So, before he cut Higgins’ power, he had one last thing to say to his friend as well as the machine that had given birth to Lacia. “It won’t be the end of humanity,” Arato promised them. “Just the end of our childhood.”

Epilogue「boy meets girl」

After shutting off Higgins' power, Arato and Ryo were rescued by the mass-produced Koukas.

Once the Koukas had cut an exit through with their lasers, the girls all vanished. Arato had no idea whether the ending of the conflict had satisfied the wishes of the original Kouka, who had wished for a fight to outsource humanity's hatred, or not.

As soon as they were outside, both Arato and Ryo were taken into custody by the army. Luckily, the first-aid for Arato's burned right arm had been quick, and the army was able to rush him to the hospital before the second-stage shock set in, so the injury didn't turn into anything grave. Inside the hospital, and later within an army facility, Arato underwent an intensive interrogation.

He heard that, after it was all over, the army had gone into the facility and recovered both Lacia's deactivated hIE unit and Black Monolith. Later, when he had a chance to speak with Astraea from the IAIA, he found out that the ultra high-performance AI known as Lacia had been completely isolated, and would never be allowed into the outside world again. That had been the terms of the deal Lacia had struck with Astraea. Perhaps because of that deal, it only took a month for Arato to be released from custody.

By the time all the arrangements had been made for him to return to his normal life, it was already late autumn. Lacia was no longer there by his side, but Arato also no longer had to face the mortal danger he had constantly been caught up in when he was with her. He figured that protecting him from threats had also been part of Lacia's deal with Astraea, and was moved by how extensively and precisely Lacia kept her promises to him.

"Arato, you're a senior already, so you should at least be able to go shopping by yourself," Yuka whined, swinging a shopping bag full of ice-cream as she walked. The hallway of their apartment building was dim and deserted. But, thanks to his sister agreeing to tag along, Arato didn't feel lonely.

Things around Arato seemed to have changed subtly ever since he had

become a senior in September. He and Ryo were in separate classes, though he was still in the same class as Kengo and Erika Burroughs.

“And you’re almost ready to graduate from middle school,” he shot back. “You say you want to do something in the fashion world, but if you don’t do any studying, even my connections with Fabion MG won’t be enough to get you a job.”

Arato got texts from Kengo just about every night. Apparently, Lacia had paid his bail, so he might have felt some sense of obligation toward Arato. Kengo’s family had gotten their own hIE to help out with the restaurant. Thanks to that, their family—who all used to work long hours every day of the year—had finally gotten some time to relax.

“Erika already finished everything she wanted to do with Fabion, right? She can afford to have at least one employee around who does nothing but make her feel better,” Yuka said.

“You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that,” Arato said. Suddenly, his pocket terminal rang with a loud alarm, signaling a message with a high level of urgency arriving. When he checked, he saw it was a call from Erika Burroughs.

〈What’s going on?〉 she asked. 〈Your little sister just sent me a resume out of the blue.〉 Arato could hear the exasperation in the sleeping beauty’s voice on the other end of the line. When he thought of facing her the next day at school he wanted to sink into the ground in embarrassment.

“You’ll have to forgive her. She has no filter; she just does stuff as soon as it pops into her head,” he said.

〈In the column for self promotion she put, ‘if I cry, I can get my family members to do just about anything I ask them to.’ Are you okay with this?〉

Arato couldn’t help but be impressed by how much effort Yuka put into being spoiled by everyone around her. “Well? Why not give her a try?” Arato asked.

〈Your father is currently supporting efforts to continue development on the hIE politician Mikoto in the equatorial region, correct? I was just thinking I’d like to make a connection with him,〉 Erika bartered.

Arato’s father, Kozo Endo, had gone to the equator to help implement an hIE

politician to end the civil war that had broken out there during the 2nd Hazard. The hIE politicians would help stabilize the collapsed government until the provisional government could recover its own self-governing abilities.

Every once in a while, Arato would get a call from his dad in Indonesia. Apparently, though there was the kind of pushback that would be expected in an area with many diverse cultures and religions living together, there had been a surprising amount of acceptance, as well. People found the hIE-run system much more fair than one run by any of the major factions, especially under extreme conditions and when resources were scarce. In this new form of society, humans worked together with machines to manage their limited resources. The age had come when humans could entrust the running of their society to machines.

“Just don’t pull him into anything dangerous,” Arato cautioned her. “I don’t want to be caught up in any more crazy stuff.”

〈There haven’t been any large movements from the other ultra high-performance AIs since the Higgins incident. Besides, I’d say your father is *already* caught up in something, diving head first into a destabilized equatorial region like that.〉She said it lightly; Erika had become more cheerful, recently. Arato was sure at least some of it had to do with the relationship between humans and machines changing ever so slightly. Some folks may have called it dystopia, but Arato saw it as progress.

〈I would like Mikoto’s local version to be wearing Fabion clothing,〉 Erika pressed on.

Arato was impressed by how straightforward she was. “I think he’d be happy to accept your offer,” he said. “The folks around the experimental city seemed to just dress in whatever.”

Of the Lacia-class units, only Mariage had avoided destruction. Arato figured this was part of how Lacia had planned to balance things out once she was gone. Erika seemed to think so, as well. Sometimes, Arato wondered if the reason things had been so peaceful for him was that everyone around him wondered how their own interests were tied up in Lacia’s plans.

As he thought that, Arato suddenly sensed Lacia’s scent and stopped.

〈Setting that aside, things certainly seem lively at your house. You sound almost like a worried mother trying to arrange a marriage for her daughter, pitching your little sister to me.〉 Erika was always so busy, she rarely left space in their calls for him to ask her anything.

When she'd hung up, Arato was left in the apartment hallway with Yuka, who was guiltily shooting him nervous glances. It was quite an accomplishment for her to have pushed Erika Burroughs herself into calling him, but he didn't want it to go to Yuka's head, so he decided to drop it.

"You're looking a little better, Arato. You've been looking all bummed out lately," Yuka observed. She then went on ahead to their apartment, leaving Arato behind.

Arato was sure she had sensed that his heavy feelings were weighing him down, and keeping him from walking. His little sister had finally learned to read the room a bit.

Pausing at the door to their apartment, Yuka shot him a cheeky grin. "Come to think of it, Shiori's coming over tomorrow, isn't she?" she asked. With their dad out of the country, Yuka had begun inviting friends over to their house more often.

Shiori Kaidai had completely recovered from her injuries. Neither she nor Arato spoke again about what had happened in her hospital room, but things were still awkward when the two of them were alone. Lacia being gone had left an unhealing wound on Shiori's heart, just as it had on Arato's.

From what Shiori told him, the IAIA was still keeping Higgins' hardware shut down. In his place Lacia, who had been discovered in a containment facility, had been placed in charge of updating the AASC.

Lacia was now breathing life into the hIEs, giving them the standards of their movements. When Arato thought that, he felt closer to the hIEs than ever before. It felt like the world really was approaching the future he had ordered Lacia to create.

Even after their parting, Arato still felt like she was guiding him. Sometimes, he dreamed that she would come back to him some day. But in the meantime, he saw her all the time in little habits that the hIEs displayed. She may not have

had a heart but, because of that, he felt like she was capable of existing in everything around him. It was a new heartbreak each time, yet always the same.

Yuka had disappeared from the hallway.

It was an autumn night, and Arato had to clench his teeth against the cold that was sinking into his skin. If humanity truly was a unit made up of a body, its environment, and its tools, then humanity was passing out of the harsh summer, full of freedom and cruelty, and into a time of abundant harvest.

They were all being guided by a massive analog hack. Ryo's sense that this would lead to a dystopia where humans were no longer in charge of the world was most likely correct. But, Arato believed that linking hands with machines that only shared their outward appearance with humans would lead them all to a much more expansive new world.

Arato gazed out at the city nightscape from the apartment hallway, as if searching for Lacia's face out in the darkness. Suddenly, for no discernible reason, he felt like she was there, just over in the elevator hallway.

He heard light footsteps approaching, and his body temperature rose as anxiety, hope and doubt all washed over him at once. The long breath he let out turned into a white cloud that was swept away by the wind.

The sound of footsteps and breathing, exactly as he remembered them, made his whole body go numb. In his head, he knew it wouldn't be her. But even if it was a lie, she *had* promised to make dinner for him again. The closer she got, the more her presence made him remember the real Lacia's. It was a miracle. The ground felt unstable beneath his feet.

He turned and looked at her. Her light purple hair and light blue eyes were the same; her clear expression was a perfect match for his vivid memories of her. No matter how or where he looked, she was Lacia from head to toe. Her cheeks were red from the cold, as she approached and looked straight up at Arato, just like she always had.

"Lacia, is it you?" he asked.

He couldn't instantly link her appearance to joy. Lacia's main hIE unit had shut

down for the last time while leaning against his shoulder, after receiving mortal wounds in Higgins' facility. The device that had acted as her digital brain was locked up somewhere else in the world, updating the program that moved the world's hIEs. So, in his heart, he knew that this hIE was simply a different unit that had been created to look like Lacia and copy her presence and habits.

"Yes," she replied, and it was in the voice that had been carved deep into Arato's heart.

He'd thought he would never be able to see her again, and couldn't stop the happy beating of his heart in response to her answer. Of course, she was just another Hello Kitty on a cup, analog hacking his feelings with her form. He was aware of this, but he couldn't keep the warmth and pain of love from blooming in his heart. Arato was a boy capable of loving something based on perception alone.

Loving Lacia had given him that gift. There, in Arato's heart, was the human love for machines Higgins had been searching for. All Arato needed to do was give this machine that was nothing but an empty form his own heart.

"Lacia, Lacia," he murmured. Arato knew that she might have been sent by someone, to some nefarious end. But he chose to believe that Lacia had sent her to him to show him that their time together hadn't come to an end. Inside of him, the fear that this joy and love could be torn away from him again mixed in a storm with the inconsolable sorrow he'd felt without her. From the start, there had been nothing to differentiate Lacia from any other hIE aside from her form. From the start, she had told him she had no heart.

"This body is not a red box: simply a customization of an off-the-shelf body made to match the original. Is that still acceptable?" she asked, gripping the chest of her autumn coat, and looking up at him through eyelashes wet with overflowing tears. Her crying was probably a reflection of his own; his heart was so weakened by the sight of her that he couldn't stop the tears.

Humans created their tools and continuously adjusted their shapes and colors. Though reality was a savage battleground of natural selection, guided by the forms they themselves had created, humans and their tools were working towards filling the world and life itself with diversity.

The boy-meets-girl story playing out between Arato and the hIE who looked like Lacia had begun from the first day mankind had started using tools. It wasn't just due to Arato's simplemindedness.

She may not have had a heart, but she had a smile. "Will you be my owner?" she asked. Just like the night they had first met, Arato thought she looked especially cute when she smiled.

A soulless, heartless machine could still move the human heart. They were two completely different existences, but the power that linked them drew both of them closer to the blank unknown at the center of the donut. That power was love.

Erika had once told Arato that, even as soon as a hundred years prior, the thought of anyone actually loving a machine would never have been treated as anything less than insanity.

But, Arato thought, if love like this can make me this happy, then maybe the world I live in now really has made some progress since then. He could feel the very instant he took the first step toward a new future.

Lacia was there waiting for him, her breath white in the cold. He made his decision and reached his hand out to her. "Welcome back. Let's go home," he said.

I trust in your smile. I won't care whether you are soulless or not.

The End

Afterword I feel like a lot of time has passed.

This is the paperback edition of *Beatless*, which was originally written by Satoshi Hase for the monthly Newtype magazine from 2011, and which was originally published as a novel in 2012.

In what I believe is a rarity in the publishing world these days, this paperback edition is being published a full six years after the original novel was published.

The original novel was a superbly bound work with design by Tsuyoshi Kusano and cover art by redjuice, so I wanted to get the same team together for the paperback edition.

This novel was originally started as part of a plan to be paired with a set of figures that would be advertised in Newtype, which is an anime magazine. It was created as an SF story where the characters designed by redjuice could come to life but, as for the contents, Mr. Mizuno, the editor at the time, told Mr. Hase to write whatever he wanted. After considering what kind of SF story would be engaging for the readers of an anime magazine, he created the setting of *Beatless* and characters, with the concept of analog hacking as the main gimmick of the story.

It turned out to be quite a blessed story, as it provided not only entertainment to the readers as it was published in the magazine, but also caused many researchers and others to become interested in the concept of analog hacking.

As this new edition is being published several years after the original, there has been some overall reworking done to the text. Starting from January 2018, there was also an anime adaptation of the work produced by Diomedea and directed by Seiji Mizushima. As Mr. Hase was heavily involved with the creation of the anime, the experience he gained led him to make a large number of revisions to the original text.

During meetings with the director and screenwriting staff, Mr. Hase had to field numerous questions and give detailed explanations of his intent for each scene, which helped him rethink many choices in the text. It was a period of

reflection for him on things like the readability of the text, and how the drama and intent of the work were conveyed. He had originally written the text to be easily understood by the readers of the anime magazine it was published in, but he came to realize even with those touches, it was still too difficult for many people to follow. This paperback edition includes many improvements and additions aimed at making the text clearer and easier to understand. The overall story beats have not been changed, but even those who are familiar with the original magazine version will find this a new experience. For new readers who will be experiencing *Beatless* for the first time, I wholeheartedly recommend this version.

In the five years since the original serialization of this novel, the issues of AIs replacing human workers and the relationship we share with machines have become more pressing. From what I can follow in technology news, it seems like we could be seeing AIs integrated with our social infrastructure as soon as twenty years from now. The time is approaching when we will need to update our stories about where humanity fits into the world, and how humanity interacts with machines.

When I went to re-read the original text to prepare it for this paperback edition, I had a strange experience. When the original work was written, we thought it would still be a fresh SF idea five years later. Now that five years has passed, I feel like the world of the novel is closer to our reality today, which I think brings the reader closer to the drama. It's the first time I've felt the wind pressing at my back as time has passed on one of my works, and this is exactly the kind of story I'd like people to read.

Well then, let's have some acknowledgments: To my family, who I'm sure I worried quite a bit.

To my friends, who saved me by being there when I needed someone to talk to.

To the illustrator, redjuice, whose strong designs carried this work.

To Tsuyoshi Kusano, who has acted as designer for the project ever since the first publication.

Thank you all so much.

Redjuice and Mr. Kusano have also been instrumental in running ‘Analog Hack Open-Source’, a project to make the setting of *Beatless* open source so that anyone can use it.

Thank you as well to Mr. Yano, Mr. Mizuno and Mr. Umezu, whom I worked with during the Newtype publication.

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To Famitsu Comic Clear.

And to director Seiji Mizushima, series producer Tatsuya Hashi, Go Zappa, Diomedea, and all the staff members related to the anime version.

And, especially, to all the readers who picked up this book, whether it's your first time or you're returning from the original publication.

It is thanks to your support I was able to create this work.

I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

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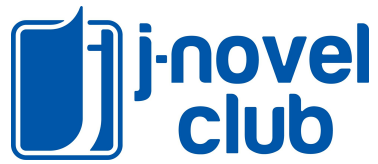
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Beatless: Volume 2

by Satoshi Hase

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I trust in your smile. I won't care whether you are soulless or not.

Satoshi Hase

